

Mark
Humphreys

Talking

to

Myself

Notes from the Road
1998 – 1999

SECOND EDITION

Featuring Revised Foreword and Newly-Added Epilogue

Talking to Myself

For anyone who's ever longed to follow a dream, or find out what it's like to try, *TALKING TO MYSELF*, a collection of essays by singer/songwriter *MARK HUMPHREYS*, will let you see it all, from the highest peaks to the longest nights of the soul.

Written on his computer in the form of e-mail messages to friends and colleagues back home while touring the United States in 1998 and 1999---and now with a newly-added epilogue from 2003---these notes from the road capture the heart and spirit of the performing songwriter traveling the highways of America in honest, sometimes jarring detail.

Informative, reflective and honest to a fault, *Humphreys* reveals the joys and heartaches of a modern-day minstrel in ways that everyone can relate to. *Enjoy the journey!*

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Talking to Myself

Notes from the Road
1998/1999

By Mark Humphreys

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Table of Contents

Foreword	<i>i</i>
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The Autumn 1998 Tour

ONE: <i>Well Okay, Tom</i>	2
TWO: <i>Motel Blues/Gasoline Shoes</i>	5
THREE: <i>Bombs Away</i>	9
FOUR: <i>Borders and Boundaries</i>	15
FIVE: <i>Seasons</i>	20
SIX: <i>Snow Big Deal</i>	24
SEVEN: <i>Guts</i>	29
EIGHT: <i>Oregon Trails</i>	33
NINE: <i>Home</i>	37

The Spring/Summer 1999 Tour

TEN: <i>Getting On With It</i>	42
ELEVEN: <i>Songs of the South</i>	47
TWELVE: <i>High Fibers</i>	52
THIRTEEN: <i>Loaves, Fishes and Buckage</i>	60
FOURTEEN: <i>Les Critiques</i>	67
FIFTEEN: <i>Stop Pay Toll</i>	74
SIXTEEN: <i>Brushstrokes</i>	83

The Autumn 1999 Tour

SEVENTEEN: <i>High Lonesome</i>	88
EIGHTEEN: <i>World Serious</i>	94
NINETEEN: <i>Reruns and Practicalities</i>	101
TWENTY: <i>The Beginning</i>	106

Epilogue: Spring 2003

UPDATE: <i>That Joyful Noise</i>	115
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Foreword

This is not a heavily-edited book. It consists of twenty separate missives—now segregated as chapters—which were originally sent in 1998 and 1999 via e-mail to a list server for poets, songwriters and other artists called the *iguanaland-list* (and later, *exile-events*). They were written quickly, with little forethought or planning of any kind. I have transcribed them here from the original texts, correcting typos and adding italics in places where I wanted to but couldn't in my e-mail program. Other than those minor changes, the messages are presented here as I originally sent them, my thought being that they should retain the sense of spontaneity and immediacy they carried when first written.

There is a newly-added epilogue, written in 2003, as a sort of catch-up and conclusion to the adventures chronicled in this book. Since writing that final "chapter," I have toured twice more, in the Autumn of 2004 and the Spring of 2005, but as of this writing I am on hiatus from the road—perhaps a permanent one, but who knows?—having reached a point where I am satisfied at having accomplished what I accomplished, and having a desire to try other things. Looking back on these messages now, it is impossible to imagine my life as it is, or how it will eventually end up, without the ten years I spent traveling the Interstates of the United States, doing what I only dared dream of in my youth. In other words: I will not, at the end of my days, find myself regretting that I never dared to live as I dreamed.

Since a lot of time has passed since these messages were first posted, the contact information for venues and radio stations which appear in each message will most likely no longer be correct or otherwise up-to-date. I therefore can't make any guarantees that the people with whom I dealt all those years ago are still where they were when I dealt with them, or even if they're still in the general vicinity. This is folk music, after all.

When I first began writing these messages I had no clue whatsoever what they would be like. I just started typing the first one, and within a couple of paragraphs an idea took hold, and suddenly I knew what I wanted to do with these notes from the road, and how to do it. The strange thing is that to this day I can't fully describe with any specificity what it is. I can say, though, that the messages themselves are the best description of my intent.

Okay, that sounds like a bunch of gobbledygook. Fine. I'll let it stand.

Mostly, what I wanted to convey was the joy I found in the process, in the understanding that every moment is a drop in a huge ocean of the adventure of experience. All of it—the good, the bad, the boring, the heartbreaking—is worth going through, because it all adds up to a *story*. This one just happens to be mine. Or, more accurately, a *part* of mine. The adventure never ends.

So—in the end what I guess I was trying to do was inspire other stories.

And who knows? Maybe I did. All I know for certain is that a whole lot of people responded—in sometimes dramatic, and always loving, fashion—and that is a gift. More than I ever expected. And so it is to the poets and artists and songwriters and oddballs of every sort who read these notes when they were originally sent (and especially Tom Ianniello, who invited me to write them in the first place, and Ritt Henn, who inspired me to put them together in this format) to whom I dedicate this little book. Thanks again for the feedback, the stories you shared from your own experience, and the love that fueled this fantasy trek into *faux* journalism.

See you down the road.

MSH

November 1999

Revised July 2005

The Autumn 1998 Tour

ONE
Well Okay, Tom

Hello everyone.

...so I was minding my own business, loading up the car for another 8 weeks of banging hell out of a perfectly good acoustic guitar and belting out my little songs across America....when Our Father Who Art in Hollywood, Tom "Oh-Yeah?-Well-I'm-From-Rochester" Ianniello, asked me if I'd send along some e-mail logs from the road during this trip and post them to this listserve.

I belong to several of these lists, and songwriters posting "thoughts from the road" are generally (vehemently) discouraged. So I was naturally flattered when Tom actually encouraged me to give it a shot. And I said okay. So let's see what happens. He said smiling nervously.

***** *****

Many of you on this listserve know who I am; for those of you who don't, here are (briefly) the basics: I'm 41 years old, I write songs, I independently release my own CDs (I currently have 3 out). I'm old enough to know better. In 1995 I decided to toss out any hope of being financially solvent and started touring, playing folk clubs, coffeehouses, book stores and a LOT of Borders outlets (more on that in later posts). Each year since 1995 I've toured more and more. This is my fifth national tour. By the time it's over I'll have spent five months on the road this year. I am definitely old enough to know better. I do all of my own booking, and work a day job while I tour, doing paralegal work when I'm not driving or playing, using a computer I take with me. This computer, actually.

And I'm damn well old enough to know better. But here I am.

Beginning with my trip in the spring of 1997, I started sending occasional missives from the road to Robert Morgan Fisher, a good and patient friend and colleague who graciously tolerated my little brain farts and who even encouraged me to send more. At first I sent them via postcard; this year I began sending them via e-mail. When Tom asked me if I wanted to send my thoughts to this whole group, I balked at first--these things are often written quickly and under strange emotional conditions--but I decided that it would be interesting to see if it works.

So every once in awhile between now and November 21 (when this trip comes to an end) I'll send a message to the list and try not to do it any differently than I would if it were to just one person. Ha. We'll see. Please let me (and Tom) know what you think by sending your own responses/comments to the server.

Thanks for asking, Tom. All hate mail will be forwarded directly to you, babe.

September 28, 1998
Salt Lake City, Utah
7:15 p.m. MDT
Tripometer: 679 miles.

I arrived this afternoon following an eleven-hour drive from Los Angeles. This is the first "waystation" on my way to the Upper Midwest, where I'll spend most of October. My first show is this Friday, October 2, in Traverse City, Michigan.

The whole process of getting out of the house is getting easier now that I'm doing this more often....basically I put everything in boxes a few days before I leave, then start living out of those boxes as I would if I were on the road. This is a good preventative system for not forgetting those "little" things--like forks, spoons, underwear....guitar strings....stuff like that. By the time I actually load the car, I've pretty much gotten everything into the boxes that I need. On my first tour I failed to pack a heavy coat. I was headed to Vermont. In late October. I paid the price. Hence this system.

I rent a car from Avis in Pasadena because (a) my personal car wouldn't make it to the Arizona line and (b) even if I had my own car, the abuse it would take (10,000 miles a month or so) would crush it like a bug after only a couple of tours. The people who run the Avis place all know me now, and the franchise owner gives me a very good deal on a by-the-month rental contract. It cuts heavily into profits, but I have a safe new car and if it breaks they bring me a new one. That's the way to travel, let me tell ya....

It's a compact, a '98 Chevy Cavalier. Loaded as follows:

TRUNK:

PA System
Boxes of CDs
Mic Stands
Gig bag with Cables and Mics
Extension Cord
Junction Box
Extra Tapes for Listening

BACK SEAT:

Box of Dry Foodstuffs
Box of Clean Underwear/Socks
Box of Clean T-Shirts (rolled)
Box of Supplies (Guitar Strings, Paper, Other Stuff)
Two Boxes of Day Job Files and Supplies
Laptop Computer and Printer (in carrying case)
Three Pillows
Two Jackets

FLOOR OF BACK SEAT:

Bag of Dirty Shirts and Pants (Closed Tightly!)
Bag of Dirty Underwear (Closed even more Tightly!)

Shoes
Brief Case
Tupperware Salad Bowl
Tapes for Listening
Umbrella
Guitar Case (laid across the top of the other stuff)

PASSENGER FRONT SEAT:

Ice Chest
Rand McNally Road Atlas
Sunglasses

FLOOR OF PASSENGER FRONT SEAT

Old Cardboard Box for Trash

Also stored in the miscellaneous nooks and crannies in the front are the tapes I'm actually playing in the cassette deck, sunflower seeds and a clip of daily driving instructions that I prepare ahead of time, telling me what roads and what turns to take to get me where I'm going on any given day without having to stop and constantly consult the atlas.

I am not anal retentive I am not anal retentive I am not anal retentive I am not.....

Once the car is loaded I always promise myself I'll get some sleep before I leave. I always try. I always fail. After all, the house has now been drained of anything I might actually be able to use, and there's really no more point to sticking around. So I go. Today I left at 1:36 a.m.

Got hit by the "sleep bomb" (more about that in a later post) only once along the way. Got here safe and sound. Tomorrow I drive another 650 miles to North Platte, Nebraska. Cedar Rapids on Wednesday. I'll finally arrive at my first "base camp" in Ann Arbor Michigan on Thursday.

Okay, so now you know all the boring basics. Hopefully this will get more interesting as the trip progresses. We'll just take it one message at a time. I've just been hit by another sleep bomb, and I gotta get up early...so until later....

TWO
Motel Blues/Gasoline Shoes

Thursday
October 1, 1998
Ann Arbor Michigan
10:32 p.m. EDT
Tripometer: 2,366 miles

***** *****

I arrived here today at noon, just under 80 hours after I left Sierra Madre. According to my calculator, that's 29.575 miles per hour, including the hours I spent sleeping. Somehow getting here so fast doesn't seem so impressive when it's broken down that way...

I got lucky in the Motel 6 department today. There are several Motel 6 locations around the country in a "bungalow" design, meaning there's no second floor (meaning no footsteps pounding, children running or adults copulating overhead), and the rooms are also spacious in comparison to most Motel 6 rooms. And I'm staying at one of those Motel Sixes. Plus it's been renovated, which means new furniture, carpeting and fixtures. No mold. Very nice.

I'll be "base-camping" here for the next four nights. Tomorrow I play the first show of the tour, up in Traverse City, which is about 250 miles to the north, near the shores of Lake Michigan. Then it's two shows here in Ann Arbor on Saturday and Sunday. Since motel rooms are so expensive in Traverse City (it's a resort area), I decided it would make the most sense to get a reasonably-priced room for four nights in Ann Arbor and just drive up and back to Traverse City tomorrow, even though that means four hours' driving in each direction. This allows me to completely unload the car, trunk and all, and keep everything in a locked room for four whole days, taking with me only the stuff I need for the gigs.

This is a good example of the continuing education in the area of economy and common sense that becomes inevitable after three years of going on these trips. I'm getting better and better at being able to figure out the best way to spend my time and money while minimizing needless hassles.

The biggest of the day-to-day hassles is the constant unloading and reloading of the car. The stuff I keep in the cab is the stuff I tend to use every day. Because it's not usually a good idea to leave anything in the cab of a car in a motel parking lot, everything in the cab needs to be unloaded, even when I'm just going to be in a place for one night. In those instances, the stuff in the trunk stays in the trunk overnight, and I never open the trunk at the motel (that way no one can see inside).

Here's how the Motel Thing works on an average day of a gig:

Get up early (between 3 and 5 a.m., depending on how far the drive is that day). Take a shower. Dress. Load the car. Drive.

Arrive at motel. I always book ahead, and always request a downstairs room, preferably one I can pull the car right in front of. When I arrive at the motel, no matter how tired I am or how long I've been driving, I open all four doors of the car and the door to the room and launch into a drill that would make a boot camp D.I. proud. EVERYTHING in the cab is unloaded and placed into the room within ten minutes. This is usually the most exercise I get on an average day. I do it as fast as I can to get it over with quickly and to remind myself it's not really such a pain in the ass (so I won't hesitate to do the same thing the next day---gotta keep tricking myself somehow).

Next I set up my office---get out the computer, the printer, all the cables, wires, splitters; set it all up on whatever table or desk is available...unplug the motel phone, run a telephone extension cord over to the computer, hook up a splitter, run a line to the computer modem and another to the motel phone (which has now been placed next to the computer). Open up all the boxes.

...go to the bathroom, for Christ's sake.

...check voice mail messages. Return calls. Check and respond to e-mail (three separate mailboxes, one for the day job, two for the music biz).

Next, I make booking calls for the next tour. Right now I'm booking for the spring and summer of next year. If I confirm any bookings, I write and post confirming letters. If I talk to a new venue that wants a promotional package, I write a letter, prepare a package (yes, I carry all the promo material, including promo CDs, with me), post it and make notes on when to follow up.

Then maybe take a nap before going to play that night's show.

After the show, I usually have something to eat. This is a BAD thing to do, and the reason why I can't lose any weight. But still I do it.

After dinner, I usually catch up on any paralegal work that needs to be done for my day job. I write all my letters, draft all contracts or other agreements that need to be done, get everything ready to mail. I carry postage and a scale so I can weigh everything, post it and get it into the hands of the Postal Service before I go to bed. This usually means a late-night drive around whatever town I'm in until I find a post office or a mailbox, wherein I place the day job mail as well as the music booking mail from earlier in the day.

Then I go back to the motel, break down the little office I've set up, close up the boxes, lay out some clean clothes, and get a few hours' sleep, starting everything over the next day.

So you can see why I like it when I can keep everything in one place for several days in a row. This gets back to learning economy. I'm getting much better at booking shows closer together over a given span of time so I can do what I'm doing this weekend. In fact, later during this tour I'll be in one place for twelve straight days---a record! And I'll be in Seattle and Portland for a week each...I guess I'm *really* getting better at this!

There are still, however, some crazy drives ahead. More on that next time.

And here's something to ponder: I haven't opened my guitar case since leaving California.

More on that later, too.

***** *****

The weather here is into heavy autumn swing. I actually have the heater on in the room. The temperatures are expected to get down into the mid- to upper-30s tonight. During the day the sunlight was spectacular, the breeze crisp and fragrant....both with the smells of autumn and the smells of freshly-baking bread (the motel is next door to a commercial bakery!).

The drive over the Wasatch, the Rockies and into the plains was stunning. Leaving Salt Lake City on Tuesday morning, I headed into Wyoming just as the sun was rising. At one point I looked down from the mountains to a beautiful, deep blue lake, surrounded by hills and specked with islands. After gazing at it, awestruck, for several minutes, I realized that I wasn't looking at a lake at all.

What I perceived to be deep blue water was, in fact, the clear, deep Wyoming sky. The hills and islands were small groups of clouds that I was still *above* as I descended in to the Great Northern Plain. The sheer depth of the expanse before me had been too much for my limited sensibilities to grasp at first. What a glorious moment!

People often ask me if I actually *see* the country as I drive through it so quickly. What's the point in driving, they ask, if I don't stop to appreciate the distance I'm traveling?

Well. Aside from the practical reasons of taking a car, you can never go too fast to experience the vastness of this country and feel the space between each of its regions. If I were King, I'd make sure that every American had the time to see this country---every bit of it---from the road. From a truck stop in Nebraska, a motel in the middle of the desert, a cafe in Birmingham. Even the briefest conversation along the way with someone who lives wherever you happen to be is a revelation, an opportunity to learn and appreciate the nuances and colloquialisms, both in language and in culture, that still exist. You really can't know what this country is until you've *felt* the distance between its borders and met those who fill its center.

And there still are colloquialisms. In Nebraska the other day I asked for directions to the nearest post office. The lady at the motel instructed me to turn onto the "one way." Not being familiar with the term "one way" as a noun, it took me several minutes to glean from her that she was referring to the road out in front of the motel, which had a concrete barrier separating the northbound side from the southbound side. In California, we call this a divided highway. In North Platte, Nebraska they call it a "one-way," because each side of the road is one-way.

While in North Platte, I stopped at the Texaco station/mini-mart across the street from the motel to get some gasoline. Pump Number Seven.

Pump Number Seven was not working properly. Instead of stopping the pumping process when the tank was filled, it just kept right on-a-pumpin'. Gasoline overflowed the tank, gloriously gushing all over the place. I managed to grab the pump and stop the flow, but not before there was a considerable pool of highly flammable petroleum product all over the ground.

I reported the malfunctioning pump to a station/mini-mart attendant, who looked at me with vacant eyes and asked me how empty my tank had been. "Almost empty," I said. "Well, that's why it did that," she said, "because the suction from your tank confused the pump."

A pause while she continued to stare blankly.

"Uh huh," I said, hoping she'd finish the thought by saying something like "and we called the repair people today---they should be here tomorrow---I thought we put an 'out of order' sign on that darn pump!"...or something like that. She didn't.

"Well, you're going to *fix* it though, right?" I asked.

More blank stare.

"...because it's *dangerous*, right....?" I continued....

More blank stare. Finally she repeated "That's why the pump did that. Your tank was almost empty." Then she smiled and walked away.

Okay, so see? There are differences, but there are also similarities among us Americans. Blank, vacant stares from young dunderheads occur in all 50 states!

When I got back to my room, the overwhelming smell of gasoline permeated everything. I washed my hands a dozen times, but still the smell continued. I finally realized that when the gasoline spilled, a significant amount of the stuff had drenched my left tennis shoe---part of a brand new pair! Not wanting to be wearing an explosive device, and also not particularly wanting to expire from inhaling gasoline fumes, I put the shoe under my car in the parking lot, hoping it would air out overnight. I fell asleep dreaming of someone throwing a cigarette butt under my car and my rental Chevy Cavalier going up in flames with my PA in the trunk.

I woke up the next morning to discover the car intact and the shoe still stinking of 87 octane unleaded regular. So I had to discard a brand new pair of shoes. I'm now wearing the nice-looking but not-meant-for-walking shoes I wear onstage until I can find a PayLess ShoeSource (TM) and buy another pair of tennis shoes.

***** *****

Tomorrow morning I'll pull out the guitar and make sure I can still play it, and sing a few lines to make sure I still can carry a tune. I'll have some corn flakes, read the paper, make some booking calls, then head out for Traverse City to start the tour officially. On the way I'll turn the radio off, listen to the cold Michigan air blow by outside the car, and remember being a teenager, dreaming of playing music for a living, in front of new people in new places. And all the time and sometimes frustrating energy I spend getting to the moment I actually take the stage tomorrow night will coalesce into one stream of consciousness, running from that boy's dreams to this middle-aged man's reality. I'm sure I'll smile. More than once.

More next time.

THREE

Bombs Away

Wednesday
October 7, 1998
Austintown, Ohio
6:40 p.m. EDT
Tripometer: 3,198 miles

Oh, swell. It's raining.

I've been here for three days cooling my heels and now that I'm getting ready to embark on the biggest two days of driving on this tour, here comes the moisture. But waddayagonnado?

The first three shows of the tour went reasonably well. Didn't really get my chops working until midway through the third show, on Sunday at the Borders Mother Ship in Ann Arbor. It was just over a one-hour set, and I opened for Martin Sexton, who was doing a promotional show for his new album at Borders in the afternoon, then playing at The Ark, the big folk club in town, that night.

The rust fell off my chops as soon as Marty himself showed up and began watching me play. Interesting how I don't get intimidated anymore when one of the "big guys" watches me play...instead, I get sharper. Must be a good sign. His band (I'm guessing it was his band) showed up and they took off...they weren't going on until an hour after I finished, so (I was told by the Borders people) they decided to look around town. Never got to talk to him.

My next door neighbor at the Motel 6 in Ann Arbor was the guy opening for Sexton at The Ark that night. Nice guy. French Canadian. He's probably well-known and I think he may have been a little miffed when I didn't recognize his name. Even now I can't remember it. Ray something...this is a continuing problem I have...I simply don't know all the "right" names and therefore can't react properly in quasi-political situations like that. Anyway, we had a couple of nice chats, he had some ironing to do and I wanted to get some sleep...so that was that.

On Monday I drove a couple hundred miles to this motel, in the Youngstown area, for three days of layover. (Side note---this is another terrifically-remodeled Motel 6, and they even have full basic cable here! I remember when Motel 6 rooms had black and white TVs that you had to buy a key for at the office if you wanted to watch the three local stations...times have sure changed...).

On Monday and Tuesday I got a *lot* of day job work done, and even *more* work done on booking for the spring and summer of next year. I spent all morning yesterday making cold calls to clubs all over the Eastern Seaboard and the southern U.S.--ended up making contact with 12 different places and sent out 12 packages. That's very good for one day. Then I spent two more hours making follow-up calls to clubs who already know me or already have my package. Then I spent seven or eight hours (at least) doing day job work. Got to bed at about 3 a.m.

Didn't pick up my guitar once.

Today I promised myself that I'd change my guitar strings and *try* to work on some new songs. I did. It felt good. But it didn't last long enough. I remembered that I had to make some follow-up calls and couldn't concentrate on the music.

***** *****

I don't know if it's all the business I have to do these days or if it's just that I'm in a classic dry spell, but I haven't written a complete new song in over a year, and only one new song in the last two years. I've got lots of ideas but I never seem to be in the "creative zone" I need to be in to create new music.

Much of it, I'm sure, does come down to not having enough time. After all, back when I was just going to the office, coming home and not having much else to do, there was plenty of time at night and on the weekend to write. More importantly, there was enough time to emotionally "stretch," to allow myself to get out of "work-work mode" and into "art-work mode."

Nowadays I either have day job work to do, or I'm booking for the next tour, or I'm driving somewhere. Even when I'm home there's never enough time to decompress to a point where I'm shaking hands with the Muse. Usually something is clouding my mind, as it was today when I remembered those calls I had to make.

That being said, though...

Over the past four years I have steadily increased the amount of time on the road. Each day has been a lot like the day before, graduating to new levels of management work slowly over time. It's difficult to notice the changes day-to-day, but as I look back over the immediate past, I can see how much the work has paid off.

And I also realize that I began this path *on purpose*, after having thought it through very carefully. I remember thinking back in 1994 that if I was to have any chance at making a living with my music, I was going to have to make the path myself. I wasn't young anymore; I wasn't darkly handsome or handsomely mysterious; my tastes in music and goals for my own art were too eclectic to package in any way that would grab the attention of any big-time management; my performance skills had eroded through years of inactivity and alcohol consumption...

In short, there was no realistic way to make a career anymore unless I re-invented everything, from scratch, and got a little more than a little dirty.

And I remember that back in 1994 I thought that if I ever reached a point where I was so busy that I could realistically make the argument that I needed to find management, and that there might be management to find, that I would have reached a level of success I had never dreamed of. And I'm there now.

Understanding that has brought a certain peace to the whole problem of not being able to write songs. I know the songs will come. I think I've got my best work in me still. And lately, thank God, I haven't been putting the needless pressure on myself to do that work. It will be done. The main concern is to not let up on the gas, to keep touring as much as I can and to keep my name "out there." The day-to-day boring stuff is the most important part of any work, I think, and once I decided to enjoy the grind (as much as it can be enjoyed), the tug-of-war between my business side and my creative side has let up quite a bit.

Weasels.

I have been fortunate in not having to deal with a lot of weasels. I guess I should feel lucky...but two days ago I got screwed by a club owner for the first time, and I'm still walking funny.

Back in June---four months ago---I confirmed a booking with (name of club withheld) in (name of city withheld, although I'd sure like to expose this twit....) for this tour. The gig was confirmed in writing.

I checked my e-mail Monday night to discover a message from someone I'd never heard of before, informing me that he is the exclusive booking agent for (weasel), and that as such he'd already booked another act on the night in question. "Sorry," said the note.

This was one of the better-paying guarantees on this tour, mind you. When I booked it with (weasel), (weasel) made no mention whatsoever about his "exclusive booking agent." I had a bona fide, confirmed booking made four months ago. And now, with only a few weeks before the show, with no ability to make up the date somewhere else, this bozo, who I didn't even know existed before he e-mailed me, is telling me "sorry." Bye. See ya. Toodles.

Now, at this point I was ready to rain hellfire and drizzling shit down upon these two knuckleheads. If I had a manager, he/she would have done so, with my blessing.

But...oh jeez. I'm my own manager, damn it. I'm the artist *and* the manager.

And the artist, at this stage of his career, can't afford to make himself known as a "troublemaker."

So after taking a day to calm down (a little), I mailed a letter to (weasel), going over all the previously-stated facts, and which concluded as follows:

As I told (your booking agent) in my e-mail message to him, I do not have the wherewithal, nor do I have the inclination, to burn bridges at this stage of my career. Instead, I will leave it up to you, your conscience and your professional goodwill as to how to handle this. I am available to play on (alternate dates), even though it would be a bit of a drive to get there; I'd do it, though, if you offered me one of those nights. In the alternative, I respectfully request that you mail me a check for my guarantee...Regardless of your response to this letter, you will not hear from me again. I hope, though, that you decide to do the right thing.

Of course, I don't expect a dime from the guy, but I did three important things with that letter:

1. I let him know I wasn't going to make any trouble; BUT
2. I let him know that I know he's a weasel without saying so; AND
3. I rubbed his nose, gracefully, in his weasel-ness.

And now we breathe deep and let it go....let it go.....let it go.....

Man, it's really coming down outside. I sure hope it lets up a little by morning. I'll go to weather.com after I send this message...

At least it's not cold. I see that snow has begun falling in Montana, where I'll be at the end of the month. Oh my oh my oh my.

We'll talk about snow another time.

Right now I'm about to enter the infamous Sleep Bomb Vortex. Beginning tomorrow (Thursday) morning, and not ending until Saturday night, I'll be doing little else besides driving, eating, playing music and sleeping.

Pull out your Road Atlases, kids.

Tomorrow I'll check out of the motel here in Austintown Ohio at 11:00 a.m., drive across Pennsylvania for a five hour (or so) drive to Tunkhannock, PA (in the mountains west of Scranton). I'll try as much as I can to sleep in the car (lotsa luck there, but I'll try) until 6:30 p.m. or so, when I'll head over to the gig, which runs from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m.

After the gig I will immediately get in the car and begin driving the 950-mile (you read that correctly) distance to Stevens Point, Wisconsin, where I have a radio interview at 4:00 p.m. the next day (Friday), followed by a live show at 8:00 p.m. in nearby Amherst. I will then retire to my motel, where I will sleep a few hours and drive to Minneapolis/St. Paul on Saturday, where I have a show that night. I will sleep in Sunday morning and drive to Madison Wisconsin, where I will be staying for 12 straight days. Talk about your ups-and-downs, eh?

This is the nuttiest bit of driving on this tour, and the nuttiest drive I've ever undertaken, period. At this point I can drive 800 miles without much trouble if I have to. I've done that many times. But 950...holy No-Doz...this means that---if I'm lucky---I'll arrive at the motel in Wisconsin at 1:00 p.m. local time after 16 hours of driving (three of which will be spent sleeping), giving me time for a couple of hours' sleep at the motel before I have to get up, shower and go to the radio station. After the radio show there won't be enough time to sleep before I have to get to the gig. Hahahahhahahahahaha. Ha. I'll bet I kick ass that night.

Here's the deal on these long drives.

First, when leaving on a long overnight drive, I always begin with a single cup of coffee. More will come later; at the beginning, it's just one large cup. Black. Always black.

Next, I find something on the radio to listen to. Preferably talk radio of some sort. A few years ago the big thing in talk radio was syndicated conservative political stuff; nowadays that's given way to sports talk. There are currently no less than three full-time syndicated all sports networks---ESPN Radio (which just went full-time), Sports Fan Radio Network and One-on-One Sports, which is the biggest of the three. I never thought I'd know so much about running backs in the Big Ten as I do now, from listening to the never-ending prattle from the likes of Bob in Indianapolis or Wally in Iowa City...what's amazing is that these men---and they're 99% men---call these programs in the middle of the night. Thank goodness, because it keeps road-idiots like me awake. They must have terrific home lives.

I should talk.

Anyway...

The first two or three hours of a long drive are the most misleading, because they trick me into thinking that everything will be a breeze. I feel great! Wide awake! Carefully watching all the traffic! Watching out for those State Troopers. Checking all mirrors constantly. Man, I'm in *control*.

At 1 a.m. Eastern Time I start flipping around the dial to find the nearest station carrying Art Bell's "A.M. Coast to Coast," the one truly original bit of radio programming on the air nationally anymore. It is radio for the Apocalypse, weird and disturbing and often hilarious. Art Bell would have been a circus ring master in another era. A snake oil salesman in yet another. There really is no way to adequately describe his program other than to say its minions include some of the most frazzled ends of the fringe. One moment Bell will be interviewing a UFO expert who believes that "they" have been among us for centuries; the next he'll be talking to a guy who predicts that the United States will no longer exist by the end of 1999; the next he'll be taking cold phone calls--no screener--from whoever happens to be on the line...that's when it really gets spooky....

So Art Bell will keep me awake, almost always, through the end of his show at 6 a.m. Eastern Time--but the problem is most stations start carrying local programming at 4 or 5.

In any event, no matter what I'm listening to, at around three or four in the morning the Sleep Bomb is launched.

We want to avoid the Sleep Bomb for as long as possible.

The first defense against the Bomb is a large bag of sunflower seeds and a really big, empty coffee cup to spit the shells in. I have found that the constant work of having to crack open the next shell keeps me alert for long periods of time, more than chewing gum could ever do. After two or three hours, though, I usually get "over-salted," and I simply can't take another sunflower seed.

The Sleep Bomb is on the radar screen now.

Next, I stop and usually get two cups of coffee, which serves two purposes--first, it provides more caffeine (although its effects are no longer very strong) and second, it fills the bladder up quickly, which results in having to drive at least for awhile in a state of having to go to the bathroom, which keeps me awake for awhile longer. But in the end I must go to the bathroom, resulting in relief. Resulting in trouble.

Sleep Bomb at 12 O'Clock. Evasive maneuvers failing.

The last grasp at staying awake is usually a candy bar or two. Not good for my health, but a brief boost for maybe half-an-hour.

By now it's around six or seven in the morning. Many hours still left to drive. Suddenly and without warning the Bomb scores a direct hit.

It lands on the bridge of my nose and spreads to my entire face, down my neck and into my arms, which begin twitching. I twitch them at first on purpose, hoping to stay awake, but suddenly I realize they're twitching on their own and isn't that interesting and OH SHIT...the car swerves slightly to the right, jolting me into temporary consciousness. Okay, I say to myself, time to find a rest area...

I begin to clap my hands and talking to myself out loud. "Stay-ay-ay away-ay-ake" I scream in rhythm with the clapping, until eventually the screams and the clapping become a movie that I'm watching from the car behind me or is it the big rig next to me and SWEET JESUS I almost sideswipe a mileage post on the side of the highway...

Now I'm only slightly awake, screaming "PLEASE GOD A REST AREA PLEASE..." My head is bobbing like a bobbin' head doll. I'm yelling out verses of songs I never heard before until they become songs in a juke box in a big crystal palace where beautiful angelsangelsangelsWAIT! I've just changed lanes in a state of virtual unconsciousness, brought out of it only by the fact that the lane change was made very abruptly. I'm scared now, baby. I'm petrified. IF YOU GET ME A REST AREA I'LL PROMISE YOU ANYTHING GOD PLEASE...

...and then the sign: "Rest Area Two Miles."

And one, final, brief bit of adrenaline kicks in, getting me safely to the rest area.

I park, put the keys in my pocket, put the seat back, grab my pillows from the back seat. put two under, and one over, my head...the last thing I usually remember is checking my watch and making a mental note not to sleep more than an hour and a half.

What happens next is, I'm guessing, the closest thing to a coma one can go into while still being able to wake up normally. It is the most aggressive, unconscious, wild sleep imaginable. A true blackout.

And what's amazing is, I always wake up right when I tell myself to. Sometimes if a really big Sleep Bomb has hit I'll pull out my little alarm clock from my day bag and set it...but I usually wake up just before the alarm goes off.

When I wake up from a Sleep Bomb nap, I use the restroom at the rest area, take a brief walk, and, well, what do you know...I feel great again.

Until the next one hits, usually about an hour or so away from my final destination. I sleep another hour, then finish the trip.

I'm not saying this is what I'll go through tomorrow night/Friday morning. I always pledge that I'll be safer next time.

And I so pledge now. No kidding.

Next message will be from Madison Wisconsin, where I hope the fall colors will be in full glory.

Till then---cheerio. Watch out for those Sleep Bomb silos. They're everywhere.

FOUR Borders and Boundaries

Thursday
October 15, 1998
Madison, Wisconsin
8:24 a.m. CDT
Tripometer: 5,140 miles

***** *****

The weather here in Southern Wisconsin has held to the textbook definition of autumn since I arrived here last Friday. The days are brightly sunlit, with powder blue skies and crisp breezes. The nights are cold-but-not-as-cold-as-it's-gonna-get, with stars and a crescent moon to take your breath away. This morning we have overcast with a chance of rain...

I finally came out of the sleep-deprived madness I imposed on myself yesterday morning. It took me all weekend to snap out of it...

As expected, it took about five hours to drive from Youngstown, Ohio to Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania on Thursday morning. It is a delightful old town (pre-revolutionary war), near the site of a major Indian massacre in the late 1700s. U.S. Highway 6 passes right through the center of town, which I was told has been the case for nearly fifty years. The rumbling of huge big rigs passing by the quaint old shops and storefronts is a bit weird until you get used to it. Proctor and Gamble has a huge paper plant just outside of town which employs a majority of its inhabitants. I was told that the plant is three miles in length; at one end is where the wood is turned into pulp; at the other end out comes toilet tissue and disposable diapers, all packaged and ready to ship.

I spent a couple hours rummaging through local shops, including one place called "The Old Store," which essentially is like shopping in your grandparents' attic, without the dust. What a glorious mess! Among other items for sale, I came upon a 1930s Wheaties box---a tin can, no less---in mint condition; a bottle of hair tonic (can't remember the brand) from the 1940s with hair tonic *still in it*; an Elvis Presley poster circa 1968 or '69; and perhaps the world's only definitive collection of LPs by The Moms and Dads.

I then drove to the outskirts of town, parked and tried to catch an hour's worth of sleep before I had to play, since I knew I'd be driving all night. I was just nodding off when I was awakened by a plain clothes Pennsylvania State Trooper, who asked for my license.

This kind of thing is bound to happen once or twice every trip, especially since napping often takes place in parking lots (like where I was in this instance), which are on private property. I always seem to get along with cops (LAPD is the one exception, but that seems to be the case with everyone), the main reasons being I always keep my hands in plain sight, always smile, and always---always---let 'em see my guitar. When they ask about that, I usually do just fine. Because that's when they ask what I'm up to, and for some reason cops always become more friendly.

Three times now (including once on this trip) I can think of times when I've gotten out of speeding tickets after getting into a discussion about what I do and how I travel. A great conversation starter.

Anyway, the cop in Pennsylvania let his guard down once I told him what I was up to and where I was playing that night, but he still wanted to check me out completely, so he ran warrants and warrants on my license. This took about 15 minutes, during which time he told me about how the State Police had such a tough job, since the local towns only had part-time police, and, you know, I just wouldn't believe how much crime there is out in the country...just as much as in L.A., you know. And by the way, he asks, you don't carry a gun, do you? I laughed and said I leave all guns in the hands of law enforcement. That seemed to be the correct answer. My license came up clean. I was free to go. The officer recommended the tuna melt at the cafe where I was playing that night.

...and that cafe...is a really wonderful place.

It's called the Rainforest Cafe (717-836-3608). It's owned by Robert Sanchez and his wife Erin. Robert is the artistic director for the Scranton Performing Arts Center. At night he drives the twenty minutes or so into Tunkhannock to the cafe, where he books the musical acts and runs the shows. It's one of those venues on the circuit where a number of well-known names continue to play because of the ambience, the quality of the ownership and the quality of the audience.

I got two out of three.

It was a Thursday night and nobody....let me repeat...NOBODY showed up. I got my picture in the paper, I got promoted on local radio, my records were being played....nobody came. Just me, Robert and the opening act, a very nice guy named John Dillon....John and I decided to shift back and forth instead of the "opening act/closing act" thing. I had a blast.

Robert felt terrible. He kept apologizing--for a singer/songwriter from L.A., to have a club owner feel apologetic about a slow night was an odd experience--but I assured him that I understand it comes with the territory. He treated me very well when I left, all things considered. I'll play there again.

This was a perfect example of how attitude means everything. I went something like 750 miles out of my way to play this place, nobody showed up, and I had a terrific time. I understand that I'm not famous, and I have to remember that...some nights people ain't gonna be rushing to be hearing me play...not yet. To get to that point, I have to survive nights like this, and enjoy the experience; the fact that I'm doing it in the first place. This reflects well on me; the club owner remembers my attitude, and things will only go up from here.

Pollyanna? Me? Maybe. But things seem to be working out okay. We'll see, eh?

So at 9:45 p.m. Eastern Time I got into my mighty Cavalier and headed for Northern Wisconsin. Turned out to be a 19-hour, 970-mile drive. Even at this moment, having done it, I don't know how I did it.

I got hit by two Sleep Bombs on the way, one that lasted 90 minutes, the other that lasted 45 minutes. The rest of the time I drove. And I arrived in Stevens Point Wisconsin with no time to check in to my motel. I had to drive straight to WWSP-FM, on the campus of the University of Wisconsin/Stevens Point. I appeared on a show called "Club Wisconsin," and it was a hoot. This station is one of those stations unheard of in SoCal--they play every kind of music imaginable, sometimes all in the same hour! While driving into town, I heard punk, R&B, folk, blues and--I swear--polka music within the span of 45 minutes...on the *same station*.

As you may guess, when the interview was done (I was pleasantly surprised to find that I still had a singing voice after 19 hours of sucking sunflower seed salt), I was a bit...uh...frazzled. But there was no time to lose.

I drove to my motel, checked in, unloaded the car, took a shower, shaved, and headed out to that night's gig in Amherst, about a 20-minute drive away. I got to the club, but it hadn't opened yet. I had about an hour before I had to go on, and nowhere to go...uh oh.

I kicked the exhaustion. Oh, daddy-o what a buzz. I noticed that my stomach was swirling up into my throat, having digested nothing but sunflower seeds and a cheeseburger sometime around ten hours before. I also noticed that I could actually feel my blood churning around my body, especially in my feet, where it felt like five tons of concrete had been tied to each of my toes. Oh boy.

I craved a real meal. I found one at the Tomorrow River Supper Club, which afforded me a deluxe Wisconsin-style high-cholesterol meal of steak, baked potato, soup and a nice garden salad, in just enough time to wolf it down and head back to the gig.

I felt human all of a sudden. For the moment. It was enough.

And I played at another great place.

The Amherst Cafe Company (715-824-2400) is owed by Dave Green, who purchased the old (circa 1860s) building about five years ago and completely renovated the interior. The main floor features a very pleasant coffeehouse which is open during the day for breakfast and lunch. The basement is the venue for music, with a nice, big stage, a good sound system and a bar with white wine in the cooler and beer on tap (beer, I have found, is very big up in these parts).

Dave showed me (with justifiable pride) photos featuring the history of the building and the progress of his renovation of the store. Most impressive was the portion of the western wall of the building that he preserved, displaying a small part of an 1880s-era Ringling Bros./Barnum & Bailey circus display mural which had taken up the entire wall at one time.

The night looked like it might turn out much like the night before in Pennsylvania...no one in sight. But as soon as I started playing, the place filled up and I played two very strong sets in front of a very appreciative audience. And I made some nice buckage, to boot. One of those nights you do this for. And another terrific owner. I really felt like the tour was underway after this show.

I drove back to the motel and fell into something that was certainly more than sleep....a little bit less than death....

On Saturday morning I left Stevens Point at about 10 a.m. and drove to the Twin Cities. There I checked into one of the most horrific motels on the face of this or any other planet.

WARNING: DO NOT stay at this motel.

It is the Motel 6 in Richfield, Minnesota. Ladies and gentlemen, I promise you that Soviet prisons offered more comfort and ambience than this establishment.

Obviously not originally a Motel 6, and obviously not renovated since being acquired by that fine chain, this building features the famed "Rubik's Cube" architectural concept, which forces all guests into a permanent state of confusion and ill-ease. There are five floors to this building. No elevators. No handicapped ramps. Lots of misleading stairways. No matter where your room is located, you have to first use your key card to enter a series of electronically-controlled doors. Next, you need to navigate a narrow stairway, either up or down, to each level. I was lucky. I only had to navigate one of these stairways. My room was on "Level One," which was actually in the basement.

Confronted with the hallway leading to my room, I was reminded of a number of science fiction/horror films in which evil lurks behind a series of doors down a demonically-narrow passage. That place exists. In Richfield, Minnesota.

Next, you have to use your card key to unlock the door to your room. This is not as easy as it sounds. The unlocking process is less a process of opening a door than it is a mythic struggle against the forces of evil. It's all in the wrist, evidently....you can't put the card into the slot too fast or too slowly, nor can you remove it in any erratic way. There is ONE way to insert and remove the card, and that one way is known only to the sinister computer controlling the lock. It takes at least five, and sometimes ten, attempts, to get the bloody thing to open the door to your room.

Now picture having to do that ten times---the number of trips it took to unload the cabin of my car.

And finally...ah, the room.

I'll say this for it: It had a brand new color TV. There were other objects in the room, but they were difficult to see through the mold. It was not a motel room. It was a holding cell.

And I paid fifty bucks for the privilege of staying there.

Needless to say, when I stay in the Twin Cities again later this month, I will not be visiting this...place...again.

Freedom!

***** *****

Saturday night, still not quite recovered from my 19-hour drive on Thursday/Friday, I played at my second Borders store of the tour. It was one of the original stores opened by the Borders brothers, so it was a bookstore only. As is the custom most of the time at these gigs, I played in the cafe to a (mostly) indifferent audience, and many people who were listening out in the bookshop. I have found that many times the people who really listen at these shows are in the store rather than in the audience.

Borders presents the trickiest aspect of this little career plan of mine.

Back in 1995 when I decided to start touring, I visited Brett Perkins at the NAS offices in Hollywood. Brett gave me a number of very helpful ideas, the biggest of which was to tell me about Borders.

Borders was started by two brothers in Ann Arbor in the early 1970s with a simple book store. Eventually they began expanding, and in the early 1990s began opening the mega-stores we see all over the place these days, which feature not only books, but a full record (CD) store and a cafe. In 1994 or so the K-Mart Corporation purchased the chain, but within a couple of years an in-house group bought it back and it is once again privately-held. Borders also now owns Waldenbooks and, I think, at least another book chain.

Each store in the chain has its own "Community Relations Coordinator" ("CRC" for short), who books all the events at that particular store. Each CRC has complete autonomy over his/her budget and thus can decide how and on what kind of events to spend it. Borders CRCs are among the busiest and most satisfied people I know. From what I understand, they don't get paid very much, but the freedom they have makes the job very desirable.

So...this also means that, unless you're a big-name act, there's no central place to go to book a tour with Borders, so you have to treat each store like a separate venue...meaning you have to deal with each CRC like he or she is a separate club owner, and you have to negotiate a fee individually for each booking.

In large cities such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago and Boston, there is such a wealth of local talent that it's very hard to get a good fee from Borders. But once you move out to the smaller markets (Upstate New York, upper New England, the midwest generally) you can get paid a decent wage for playing these shows. A three-day weekend swing of Borders gigs can net me \$300-\$400 in some places.

And they're a good place to break in to a market. Once I get booked at a Borders I can usually get a radio booking in that area, and hopefully use that to make enough contacts to find a better place to play the next time I come through.

And that has been my game plan over the past three years---to play at Borders if I can't find a folk club in a given area, then use that booking to build an audience and hopefully start getting better bookings somewhere down the line. It is working. But it is working very slowly.

I still play Borders on a 2-to-1 ratio with regular folk venues. The folk venues are getting better and better, but it is such a slow process that it can feel very frustrating.

I'm now booking for next spring and summer, and it is very gratifying that so many CRCs want me back in their stores. But, of course, with the exception of a few stores which really treat the music properly (i.e. NOT in the cafe, or if in the cafe, in an atmosphere conducive to listening rather than talking), these are not places to have your music heard in a setting which respects the artist. And while I almost always do well financially (in addition to the guarantees, Borders shoppers tend to be more affluent than your average folk club patron, and will buy my CDs on impulse after hearing just one or two songs), it's hard to see the light at the end of the career tunnel playing so many of these shows.

That having been said, when I use that old "look at the big picture" method, the fact that I haven't stopped touring, haven't looked up to much to complain, has made it possible for the better gigs to start popping up. So I'll keep playing at Borders as long as the gigs keep opening up possibilities and not putting up boundaries.

...and it wouldn't be fair if I didn't admit that some of my biggest fans now are people who first saw me at a Borders show. So...on we go.

Starting tomorrow I've got three shows here in town. I've walked around downtown Madison (and will do so again today). It's a lovely place. Very much a college town. Great book stores, record stores and a truly wonderful little music store on State Street that carries some exquisite Taylor and Martin guitars.

And, of course, since it's a college town, heavy drinking seems to be a major activity. There's a liquor store on the corner of State Street and Gilman Street which calls itself "The Happiest Corner in Town." The banners advertising this week's specials don't just have prices on them---each one contains at least a paragraph of hilarious prose on some aspect of drinking. Ya gotta love it.

Plus...it's autumn in Wisconsin. So everything looks beautiful.

What the hell am I doing in my motel room?

Talk to you soon.

FIVE Seasons

Thursday
October 22, 1998
4:25 a.m. CDT
Madison, Wisconsin
Tripometer: 5,799 miles

***** *****

Getaway day, finally.

This is my twelfth straight day here in Madison, and I'm ready to move on. I've never stayed in one place this long before when on the road. It's been a little weird, a little boring, a little bit of an adventure.

***** *****

By this time tomorrow morning (the plan goes) I'll be on my way to Detroit via Milwaukee and Chicago. I want to get out of here no later than three a.m. so that I can get through Chicago before the really bad rush hour traffic begins. New York and L.A. are Traffic Legends around the world, but if you ask me Chicago has the worst traffic jams anywhere.

Several major Interstates converge in the area (I-90, I-94, I-80, I-55, I-57 among them), which means that not only do you have local traffic pouring into the grid; you also have travelers (like me) from all over the country passing through, trying to get somewhere else. And in the heart of Chicago, where the roads are always under construction, there's never really a good time to do it. There are just better times than others. Very early in the morning is one of the better times.

Adding to the mess is the annoying way Illinois collects money for its toll roads in Chicagoland. Instead of having one place at the beginning of a turnpike to get a ticket and one place at the end to pay, the Chicago-area tollways feature toll booths every few miles or so, where drivers are forced to wait in line and come up with some odd amount of change (30 cents is not uncommon) before being allowed to move on again. At the height of the morning or afternoon rush, this can be completely mind-bending, especially when the weather gets nasty.

And then there's the mysterious way Chicagoans identify their roads and travel conditions on them.

When I was growing up in L.A., I was often confronted with visiting friends and relatives complaining how confusing it was to navigate freeways in Southern California, because they all had names and no one used the identifying numbers to describe them. Over the past twenty years or so, though, L.A. freeways have finally begun to be identified, both by locals and by radio traffic reporters, by their route numbers as well as their names (i.e. the San Bernardino Freeway is I-10; the Pomona Freeway is Route 60, etc.), making it easier for those not familiar with the region to find their way around town.

Not so in Chicago. The expressways (as freeways are called east of the Mississippi) are almost exclusively identified by their names. The Edens. The Kennedy. The Eisenhower. And on and on. No identifying numbers.

But here's the kicker: Trying to understand a traffic report on any Chicagoland radio station is, for someone from out of town, a lot like trying to comprehend an entirely new language. It took three visits to the area for me to finally figure out that the way Chicago traffic is reported is in terms of how much time it is estimated to take an average car to travel from one landmark to another. The "Post Office" seems to be one big marker. Of course, I have no idea which post office they're talking about. I'll hear something like "inbound on the Edens, 20 from the bridge to the Post Office, 45 from the curve to the outer toll" or some such nonsense like that, mixed in with other similarly cryptic phrases, all strung together and read in the quick, clipped manner of a farm auctioneer selling off a herd of livestock. It is *absolutely impossible* to figure out unless you've spent a very long time in Chicago. So forget traffic reports.

And then there's the Indiana Toll Road.

This would be where I-80 and I-90 come together just east of Chicago, traversing the length of Indiana to the Ohio line. The twenty miles of this road from the Illinois line eastward, in both directions, can be one long trip to hell. And there's no real way to tell when or how badly you'll get hit.

There are more huge (and brothers and sisters I mean BIG) trucks on this stretch of highway than just about anywhere in America. And for some reason they clog the Indiana Toll Road just outside Chicago in a way unlike anywhere else.

Picture sitting in a tiny compact car, snow blowing like a motherfucker from the lake, and you're sitting in a steel sandwich between three trucks (one on your right, one in front of you, one in back of you), each the size of a small skyscraper. Once you're out in the middle of the country, these trucks get huger than anything you'll see in California, and there are hundreds of them all coming into or out of Chicago.

Although I'll only have to traverse the tiny stretch of road leading into the Toll Road on my way to Detroit (I'll veer onto I-94 into Michigan), that small bit of highway at the end of the Chicago Loop just before the Toll Road begins can still be really nasty. I'm hoping to time it just right tomorrow and get through the entire Chicago expressway system at something close to the speed limit. Your prayers are welcome.

This past weekend I played three shows in Madison. On Friday night the last real evening of "Indian Summer" struck. It was gorgeous. The daytime temperatures were in the 80s, and the evening was downright balmy. People *did not* want to go inside, and for the most part, they didn't.

That night I played at Cafe Assisi (608-255-1816), which is right in the heart of the State Street district downtown, above and next to several very punk establishments (a gift shop, a record store and an apparel outlet where you can find just about anything to make you look like you died sometime last spring). Cafe Assisi itself is an anomaly in this grouping of stores, in that it is a very easygoing, comfortable coffeehouse. It's run by a collective of (mostly) very young and (100%) idealistic people. God bless 'em. The night I was there, not only were most people outside enjoying the last taste of summer, I also got the impression that my music, though not inappropriate, was not getting the reception that, say, Rod Smear, would get. Rod would probably be worshiped as a God by the kids I ran into there. Overall, not a bad experience, but not anything spectacular.

The following night, Saturday, I played at a wonderful place called Eureka Joe's (608-258-9881) in the more "yuppified," but still "un-Starbucked" Monroe Street district of Madison. This is a neat venue, with a stage that doubles as a mural during the day and folds down from the wall for performances. Very warm, receptive people were in the audience, and the owners, Tobin and Karen Morrison, couldn't have been nicer. Folkies---check this place out on your way through.

On Sunday I played at the newest Borders store in town, one where the CRC is clearly a big music fan. She treated me very well and made sure everything was to my liking, which was very nice. One big problem was she didn't have my check...the home office had lost my contract. So now I have to wait a couple of weeks to get my money. Oh well. By the time I get it I'll probably really need it.

***** *****

In the days prior and subsequent to the three shows over the weekend, I've spent a lot of time driving into town, walking around and watching the seasons change.

It is striking, to a native Angeleno, to witness such dramatic alteration of the climate in such a short amount of time. Some mornings I'd awake to see trees whose leaves had been green at sunset the day before, now golden, sparkling in the bright autumn sunlight. The day after the summer-like weather, rain fell and the temperature dropped 20 degrees. The past couple of days have been very cold, especially at night. I'm looking out into the pre-dawn parking lot here at the Motel 6, where I see that all the cars are covered in frost.

There is major road construction being completed on Route 12/18 just beyond the motel here. The road work is almost done, and the workers are rushing to finish it all by the end of the month, when the rough winter weather will make any additional work impossible until spring. A couple of days ago, at dusk, after the workers had gone home, I took a walk on the still-closed, abandoned highway. I swear I could feel the seasons change inside me.

Wind swirled all around, with just the vaguest hint of ice in its gusts. Small puffs of clouds floated in a deep purple sky as the sun set behind me. A large flock of geese, honking loudly to each other, rested on the hills across the road, eventually resuming their flight south, one group at a time, in those beautiful formations that somehow I only noticed before in movies or in books. And now there it was, right in front of me, the precision, the magnificence of it.

Somewhere inside of me there was a shift, a subtle but discernible awareness of a newer, warmer, more peaceful time to come. A sadder and lonelier time. A richer, more meaningful time. I sensed, all at once, a renewal and a release; a birth and a death; an accommodation with what has passed and an impatience to welcome what I have not yet begun to understand.

It scared the crap out of me. It stirred me, as it stirs me still.

Soon winter will be here, both in the sky and in my experience. Perhaps what I felt the other day out on that abandoned stretch of highway was my first acceptance of the winter to come, and my first willingness to welcome its wonders once the snow falls.

On to Michigan, then the Twin Cities, then Montana....

SIX
Snow Big Deal

Sunday
November 1, 1998
Moses Lake, Washington
7:54 p.m.
Tripometer: 8,912 miles

***** *****

Let's see now...where was I?

I just spent five wonderful days with my friend Phill and his fiancée Donna, who live in Billings, Montana. Phill is an ear, nose and throat surgeon and Donna is a registered nurse and they live in, well, the closest thing to a mansion you can get in Billings. They are the most easygoing, happy people I think I have ever met. No kids, happy to be just the two of them (they've been engaged for something like five years and have no plans yet for the wedding), two big ol' dogs which are just the nicest damn canines the world has ever seen...

...what I'm telling you is that I spent the last five days ignoring all my responsibilities and just enjoying myself. There were two shows in Billings (more below), but the main thing was just forgetting about all my worries and enjoying being someone's guest.

Today it was back to the road. So now I'm here in eastern Washington state, where the land is wide open and the air is definitely...wet. Tomorrow I hit Seattle for a radio show and four live performances....but first here's a rundown of Life Since Madison:

***** *****

Dearborn Michigan is where most of the Ford, Lincoln and Mercury products in the U.S. are manufactured. It's still Henry Ford's town. In the restaurant parking lot next to my motel there I counted roughly five Ford motor vehicles to one of any other make. And, as one might expect, the entire Detroit area is virtually an import-free zone. It is definitely chic to Buy American in the Motor City, and when I actually saw the huge factories and witnessed firsthand how important they are to the economy of the entire region, I wasn't in any mood to argue with the sentiment.

In Dearborn I played at a Borders store that does a very good job of presenting music. I was set up in the Music Department, not in the cafe, and about two dozen chairs were set out in front of the stage area. So far so good. Now I just needed people in the seats.

The first set was one of those examples of just...getting...on...with...it with little more than pure faith. There was nothing---zero---about that first set which would lead any rational person to believe that risking one's personal security by playing music, on spec, 2500 miles from home is a good idea, or even a fair idea. I'll be clear: There was *nobody* in any of those two dozen chairs. There was *nobody* anywhere near where I was playing. It was as if I had a sign around me reading "WARNING. Listening to this guy's music may result in cancer, hives, lice and/or 23 life-threatening allergies known to occur in book store patrons."

I just smiled and played my set.

During the break I went outside and got some fresh autumn air, marveling the entire time at how I wasn't bothered--not one little bit--at the total lack of attention I got paid inside that store. If I needed anything to prove to myself that I am now completely devoted to this madness, it was that realization.

So I went back inside.

And—*voilà!*---there were some people in the seats. Out of nowhere. A couple of them were reading, but the rest actually appeared to be waiting for music to start. Okay, fine. I began playing my second set and like magic all the seats filled. All of them. Overflow people stood in the back, and some sat on the floor. They laughed, they cried, they LISTENED. I sold CDs, made some nice new friends and a nice chunk of cash.

So the night went from being a joke to being a *total* success, and there's no real way to explain it. But I do know this: If I had emotionally "packed up" and made myself depressed over what happened during the first set, I would never have held the audience during the second.

While in Dearborn I got an e-mail message from a member of the Seattle Folklore Society. The message said that the Society was the sole booking agent for the Grateful Bread Cafe in Seattle. He said he noticed my booking at the Grateful Bread on November 4 while perusing Musi-Cal, and that he wasn't aware that I'd been booked there.

Shit.

Visions of losing another show to Owner Incompetence danced in my head. Like the other dumped show (previously discussed), this one was booked with a representative of the owner, confirmed in writing back in May. Somewhere along the line the Folklore Society took over booking, the person who booked me left and no one told anyone about my show.

I called the venue and eventually was given the home phone number of the owner. I am pleased to report that the owner of the Grateful Bread Cafe, whose name is Rod, is an honorable guy. There was no one booked to play there on the day of the original booking, so I worked out a deal with him to waive my guarantee (which made him like me straight away and, since I would have lost the argument anyway, saved the gig for me) and move the starting time to earlier in the day. Hopefully the mutual gestures of goodwill will make it possible to get a bona fide booking there when I come through next year. It's certainly made me a good buddy of Rod's.

On Saturday night the 14th I drove up to Cedar, just north of Traverse City, to play the Cedar Tavern (616-228-7445/Contact: Andrea Kirby). Cedar is a tiny community just below a ski resort. The day I was there autumn was in full flower, though, and no one was thinking about skiing. The tavern is right in the middle of town, and every Saturday night they present singer/songwriters. And some good ones at that. Looking at the clippings on the wall, I saw that some fairly well known artists had played in the tiny nook next to the door where the music is presented. So, knowing I was in fairly good company, I proceeded to play four (count 'em) sets, from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. (!!!).

It was a little strange. There were a few people, during the first set, who came to hear the music. These people listened attentively, bought CDs, shared some nice conversation during the first break...

But then the rest of the night I played into a sound-storm of happy drunks who couldn't have cared less whether the songs being presented were all-original folk, semi-original polka or head-banging rock. Oh well. The ownership treated me fine, with a nice guarantee, and I figured if Michael Fracasso could play through that (and based on the clippings on the wall, he was one of the many who have), then so could I...

Right after the show, at 1 a.m., I got in my car and made the last really crazy drive of this tour...750 miles straight to Minneapolis for my final Borders appearance this time out, and I made it there with enough time to spare to take an hour-long nap before I had to get up, shower and dress for the show. The shift from Daylight to Standard time, as well as the shift of time zones, added two hours to the drive. Time is a very odd thing when it gets stretched like that...

And then I headed west.

Minnesota and North Dakota are harsh, hard landscapes. There's something about the miles and miles of rolling hills that seems very...serious. No nonsense. More than any other place I've visited, North Dakota clearly demonstrated in its geography the same simplicity and directness of the people who live there; they seemed one and the same---difficult to differentiate the rough, unrelenting hillsides along the highway with the face or the voice of the man in the gas station mini-mart. Not bland, but not exciting. Polite, but nothing to trifle with.

And then there's Montana, where I spent the past five days.

I live in the west, geographically. But I don't live in The West. Montana is The West, for real, no bullshit. The first thing that hit me when I crossed the state line was that there is NO SPEED LIMIT during the day. As long as the sun is up, automobiles may drive at any speed which is "reasonable and prudent."

I drove 100 miles per hour and no one blinked an eye.

What a blast! The highway was straight, dry and well-maintained. There was no wind to speak of. The sun was bright and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. And 100 mph seemed like the most natural thing in the world. And oh, how much that blew my concept of travel time! A distance of 200 miles suddenly seemed like a trip around the block.

The scenery is spectacular. Wide vistas interrupted by dramatic buttes and ridges. The sky is every bit as big as advertised. And the culture is as plain and raw as it gets, except maybe in Alaska, where many Montanans, disgusted with all the new laws (brought on, allegedly, by all the goddamned Californians moving in), are moving. This is a place where you come to if you do not want anyone telling you what to do; if you don't particularly care what the next guy does as long as he doesn't do it to anyone else; if you don't really want to have anything to do with many other people. And mostly, you come to Montana if you like to hunt.

My friend Phill the Surgeon tells me that hunters control the politics of Montana the way, say, trial lawyers control the politics of California. Ideologically the state is mostly conservative, but the wildest and the weirdest of all extremes are welcome as long as they stay in their cabins and don't actually blow anything up. But breathe even a hint of taking away a man's right to kill his dinner, and you're asking for trouble, partner.

This "live and let live" atmosphere is ideal for someone like Phill the Surgeon, a tall, laconic man with a wry sense of humanity's absurdities and a truly gifted doctor who loves helping people in need. This also applies to Donna, who works down the street from the hospital where Phill plies his trade. They can be do-gooders there and no one makes a big deal about it, which Phill and Donna prefer. But Phill can also take life at a leisurely pace, play golf without any professional politics haunting him; walk the dogs with a guest from California for hours at a time knowing that if his beeper goes off he can be where he's needed almost immediately without having to fight traffic or deal with bureaucratic buffoons back at the hospital. In short, this couple will live to be 100 years old simply because they have *zero* stress in their lives, and they do good, meaningful work. Hanging out with people like that for five days can be intoxicating.

With the exception of my first day in Billings, I completely dumped any pretense of working on my bookings for the spring (I crossed the halfway point, with 43 confirmed bookings, the week before) and just spent my time taking long walks with the dogs, eating real food, arguing politics and culture, and just basically living like a human.

The shows in the area were also rewarding. On Friday night I played at the Broadway Cafe (www.broadwaycafe.com---phone 406-259-3063/Contact: David), located in the old part of downtown Billings. A cavernous, corridor-like room with high ceilings and a lot of hardwood, it looks like an acoustic nightmare when first observed. But once I did my sound check I could tell right away that this is one of the best sounding small coffeehouses I've played in.

The cafe is adjacent to a rock club, and there is a door open between the two rooms. The cafe provides food for the bar, and bar patrons are allowed to bring their beers into the coffee house. Coolest of all, they have it arranged so that the acoustic folkies play in the cafe from 7 to 9 p.m., and the band next door starts up at 9. Perfect...and both rooms get overflow from each other.

I did very well there despite a relatively small audience. The house does not provide any guarantee, but the tips and CD sales I made that night totaled more than I make at a lot of larger venues. Plus David, the kid who handled the booking, really likes acoustic music, and it's always nice when you have the house behind you.

Last night I played the absolute nicest place so far on the tour--the Historic Round Barn Theater and Restaurant in Red Lodge (406-446-1197/Contact: Rob Johnson), about an hour northwest of Billings. It's an old dairy barn that has been converted into a restaurant downstairs and an auditorium in the old loft upstairs. This is a major venue in the area, and it was a mini-coup to headline there....although Rob, the owner, was honest about why he booked me--(a) it was Halloween, meaning a lot of people were at parties or trick-or-treating with their kids, and (b) Jackson Browne was playing a benefit that night in Billings, and just about everyone who would otherwise go to the Round Barn was going to be there...so my task was to prove that I could pull in an audience. And I'm pleased to say that I did just fine. I told Rob that I'd waive a guarantee if I could work the room for donations and CD sales, and he agreed. He advertised a free Halloween show with my picture over some pretty good ad copy, and he also distributed special flyers on the day of the show, where my photo was altered to make me look like Count Dracula. Pretty hilarious, actually. And while it was by no means a full house, I did respectably and made a good impression. One patron told me afterward that he liked to see someone "working as hard as you do up there!" Jeez, I hope it doesn't show *that* much!

***** *****

Today I left Billings at 6:30 a.m. and drove 600 miles straight through to Moses Lake, just 180 miles from Seattle. I am pleased to report that I have made it over the highest mountains and the northernmost regions of our Great Country this autumn without getting hit by snow (knock on wood). My greatest fear was that I'd get clobbered by lake effect snow going around Lake Michigan or that I'd be stranded at Lookout Pass high up in the Rockies and freeze to death in my car, rescue workers shaking their heads as they find my frozen corpse clutching my Dodger sports bag and my last can of Diet Pepsi.

But it didn't happen. And hopefully it won't for the rest of the trip. Snow, for a native Angeleno, is one of those features in nature, like tornadoes and hominy grits, which make the skin crawl and the heart weak. We would rather walk barefoot to Barstow than face one flake of frozen precipitation.

I got caught in exactly one honest-to-God Nor'easter back in April of 1996 when in the Boston area. I arrived at Framingham College at 6:30 p.m., and even though the radio warned me it was coming, there was no sign of a storm in the sky...it was a little steely-gray, yes, but everything was dry as a bone.

When, at 9:00 p.m., I re-entered the parking lot, it was as if someone was aiming a snow-blower at my head, and my car was almost buried. I managed to get the car out onto Route 9 and followed, as close as I could, some poor guy in a Volvo who, I reasoned, must have seen my California plates and panicked, because he kept trying to get away from me. I stayed on his tail, though (finally realizing that he wasn't trying to get away from me, but just stay a reasonable amount of space ahead of me so that when I inevitably lost control of my car I'd smash into a light standard and not him), all the way to my motel, slipping and sliding the entire way. The next morning my car was completely buried, and I had the unenviable learning experience of shoveling snow. Never again, I vowed.

And so, like the glutton for punishment I've become, I naturally booked this tour during a time of year when snow usually falls. This year it didn't. Either Someone Up There likes me or Someone Up There's about ready to take advantage of a dangerously false sense of comfort and zap me big-time.

Gotta go now. Time to say my prayers.

SEVEN
Guts

Monday
November 9, 1998
Tacoma, Washington
10:37 a.m. PST
Tripometer: 9,885 miles

This tour has now turned a corner in a couple of substantial ways. Starting a couple of weeks ago in Billings, I've been making contact with people....meaning more than just running into them. In Billings I stayed in the home of friends, which allowed me to have normal conversations again. Then this past week in Tacoma I spent time with other people---and even ran into some friends from L.A.

The other big change is that the shows are fast and furious now through the end of the trip. I played four this past week, and when I'm done typing this note I'll get right in the car (already loaded except for the computer) and drive down to the Eugene Oregon area for another week of four shows and two radio spots.

In Oregon, I'll be staying with another old friend the entire week, so more real conversations are sure to follow....

I hit the Puget Sound area on Monday November 2, driving straight to Bellevue for a noon radio interview, which went very well, considering the DJ did not know me from Adam, had not received my advance package (bio, CDs, etc.) and basically made things up as he went along. In the end I think he enjoyed my stuff, and he gave my upcoming shows more than the requisite number of plugs.

That evening I hooked up with Brian Prosser.

I had never met Brian before. He had contacted me when I started posting these notes and was very supportive...so in our further communications (and then in conversations with other former Iguana-ites) I learned about his past life as one of the first and biggest supporters of the Iguana Cafe, its poets and musicians. Brian left L.A. just about the time I started hanging out at the Iguana. He has one of the wildest, most creative minds one might ever come across. Nothing, however, prepared me for the experience of meeting him in person.

I drove out to Des Moines, about 20 minutes north of Tacoma, to meet Brian and to bring him some CDs by Andrew Lorand, Rod Smear and myself. He had told me via e-mail that he would make good use of them, and while I didn't quite understand how, Andrew, Rod and Tom Ianniello all assured me that it would be a very good idea to pass them on to Brian.

Brian lives in two places, and I saw both of them. The place in Des Moines is owned by Bruce Bickford, who works in various visual arts, but mainly intense, dense, incredibly intricate clay animation. Bruce did a lot of animation for Frank Zappa, and was working on a frame when I got there. Also sharing the space at Bruce's home is Lynn (last name escapes me), another artist who I remember from the Iguana, who now does work with Brian and creates his own art, mostly on computer.

Brian himself makes a living doing computer-generated special effects for film and television (currently it's "Hercules" and "Xena"), but what Brian's about is something totally outside any box you might want to try to put him in.

The man is a living, breathing hurricane--of ideas, of action, of poetry, you name it. But more than anything, music *matters* to him. In the three consecutive days we saw each other, it was almost impossible for me to keep up with the intellectual roller coaster ride streaming from Brian's lips. I told him at the end of it all that I felt like my head was overflowing with ideas. I could spend pages and pages of text talking about the experience, but it would not do the man justice.

On Tuesday night, I picked Brian up in Des Moines and we drove to Seattle, where I saw his second living space, that of his girlfriend, Kitty. Kitty is an artist and a poet, and I saw/read some of her work at her home. Kitty's house, just like Brian's space in Des Moines, is filled with amazing sculpture, large and small, each signifying, Brian explained, a specific place in time.

We drove that night into downtown Seattle, where we saw June Melby and Matthew Niblock perform excerpts from a new work of June's. It was a treat seeing both of them there, each of us just happening to be playing in town that particular week. June's work is extraordinary. Again, I could go on and on about it (and I probably would if check-out time wasn't so rapidly approaching!). Suffice it to say that June's work affects me the same way Andrew Lorand's best stuff does--it is hilarious and tragic all at once, and can make me feel both emotions simultaneously...a curious, unique feeling.

Brian and Kitty came to see me play the next day at the Grateful Bread Coffeehouse in Seattle. As he listened, he made me a gift. Constructed of plastic bailing wire from his stay in Nebraska (another amazing story), it is a sort of charm bracelet from which hangs a piece of paper on which Brian had drawn a picture of me. The paper was then folded tightly into a small cube-like ball and hung from the bracelet. Brian told me that the paper was to remember that particular day, and that I should add other tidbits from the road as I go along...maybe a bottle top from this town, or a crumpled napkin from a coffee shop in that one...a memory bracelet. And then he asked me to choose from several small sculptures he had around his own neck, to take with me, which I hung from my keychain. I'm not sure I'll be as good about collecting the keepsakes as Brian would be, but I do know that the "bracelet" will hang from the mirror of every car I take on the road, and the sculpture from every keychain hanging from the ignition of those cars. Thanks for filling up my head, Brian.

A Humphreys family legend:

The date is summer, 1964, in St. George, Utah. The family (mom, dad and five small children, yours truly being the oldest) have stopped at the end of our first day of driving from L.A. to Denver to visit friends for a couple of weeks.

We stay in one room at the TraveLodge. This is the first time I ever remember staying in a motel room.

That entire first day we ate sandwiches and other miscellaneous foodstuffs prepared by my mother at home. But oh, the next morning. We had breakfast at the coffee shop next door.

Now you have to understand that my parents were never poor, but when I was a kid they never had an inch to spare, financially. This meant that we never went out to eat, that we always ate home-cooked food, and that food was as economically prepared as possible.

So here I was, about to turn seven years old, walking into a coffee shop, all full of the smells of pancakes and sausage and coffee...and I could order any of it...it was a wonder to behold!

And when the meal showed up, next to the toast there were these little pats of...butter. Not margarine, which I had always eaten at home, but butter....!

And so, I yelled in amazement, at the top of my lungs: "MOMMY LOOK! REAL BUTTER!"

A pause as my parents buried their heads in shame, now revealed by their loudmouth eldest son as white trash in from the trailer park...everyone in the restaurant was staring...I instantly knew that I'd done something wrong...

...but God bless 'em, my parents never were proud people. After a moment to gather themselves, they burst into laughter, and calmly told me that yes, it was real butter, and that it was no big deal, it's just that we don't eat it at home.

To this day---I swear---at any family gathering, when the butter is placed upon the table, any family member present (even those who were not born at the time of the incident!) scream "HEY MARK! LOOK! REAL BUTTER!"

That story contains the basics of my life thereafter: A desire to venture out onto the road and see new places, and stay in motel rooms and have my food cooked for me....and food....and food....

I have beaten down the worst aspects of my tendency to overspend; I have kicked alcohol out of my life so completely that it's hardly even an afterthought anymore....

...but I will always be at war with my stomach.

Last year I was able to lose 50 pounds over six months or so, all in a very healthy way. And yet, despite my best efforts, being on the road six months this year, where all that real butter flows and self-discipline is hard to come by, has brought 25 of those pounds back, and now my gut hangs over the belt again as though I were 6 months pregnant.

Many things have changed about my relationship to food, the best one being the fact that I no longer punish myself for treating my body like an accordion. The risks I've taken, the roads I've traveled, the demons I've already put to rest...all these things give me reassurance that I will conquer this monster as well.

Still.....the harsh *awareness* of what I'm doing, while it will be the thing that finally cures my overeating, is sometimes shocking. For now I can actually *feel* the food filling the emotional gap inside me, and it's disturbing as hell.

...and that emotional gap is huge, bigger even than this silly gut protruding like a hood ornament from my middle. The extent to which it goes away and stays away will depend on how and when I fill that gap.

I'll talk about that next time, if I'm up to it.

For now, it's on through the cold rain to Oregon.

EIGHT
Oregon Trails

Tuesday
November 17, 1998
Fort Bragg, California
9:59 a.m. PST
Tripometer: 11,105 miles

***** *****

Ah, California.

I came back into the Golden State yesterday from Oregon via U.S. 101, a beautiful drive that I'd made only once before, about eight years ago. It was overcast the whole way, but it took nothing away from the scenery.

The Pacific Coast Highway (California Route 1) begins off of 101 in the town of Leggett. PCH winds its way from Leggett for 44 miles to the coast and Fort Bragg...and I know every one of those miles, I assure you, because they are filled with extreme twists and turns, and I suffer from the world's worst case of motion sickness. Yes, ashamed though I am to admit it, I can actually get car sick even when I'm driving. And, well, let's just say that we're all happy I skipped lunch yesterday, because by the time I got to Fort Bragg the mere thought of food would have...oh, gosh, let's just move on, shall we?

***** *****

A week ago yesterday (November 9) I left Tacoma and headed down to Corvallis, Oregon (between Portland and Eugene in the Willamette River Valley), where I spent the week with Mike, another old friend who I don't get a chance to see very often. Mike works for Hewlett-Packard in their huge facility in Corvallis, on the graveyard shift. HP seems to be a great place to work---Mike's shifts run from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. on a three-day/four-day per week basis. In other words, he'll work four consecutive nights, then take three days off, then work three consecutive nights, then take four days off, then repeat. Pretty cool, because this means he has lots of time off and makes a great wage...plus (according to Mike) HP has never laid off any of its employees in its entire history.

I know Mike from back in my younger days, when he was the drummer in several bands, including two that I was in. In the late-1980s Mike essentially lived, on and off, in his Volkswagen van, working here and there, traveling the country following the Grateful Dead, camping, occasionally dropping by L.A. to visit me and the friends he still had there...and then a little less than four years ago he decided he didn't want to do that anymore, moved to Oregon, took an algebra class at a local junior college to satisfy HP's basic education requirements (he completed the class several weeks ahead of schedule), got a job at HP, and just this past year bought a house. Just like that. I don't think I know anyone else who has shifted so drastically (and successfully) from one lifestyle to another.

I basically turned Mike's kitchen dinette into my personal office space, and did my day job and booking work there, with the big screen Trinitron on at all times. I'm glad I can't afford a big screen TV. I'd never leave the house.

On Wednesday I played at Café Paradiso in Eugene (541-484-9933; contact Greg Fleener at 541-431-4412), a nicely-appointed venue with carpeted floors, a good-size stage and a pretty good sound system. Since Eugene is a college town, I was playing mostly for very young people, many of whom were studying for finals week. Most were tapping their toes, though, so I took that as a good sign.

The following night I did a show at Coffee People, also in Eugene (541-302-1771---contacts vary; call to inquire). This is your basic loud-linoleum-drastring-color-scheme college student hangout. The kids who run the place are some of the most fun, easygoing people I've ever run into. Plus they gave me a decent guarantee (for a Thursday night during finals week).

Saturday was the busiest day on the tour so far...Mike, off work for the weekend, joined me as we first traveled to KLCC in Eugene for an 11:30 appearance on Frank Gosar's Saturday morning/early afternoon program (e-mail Frank at fgosar@efn.org). Frank was the first and only person I've ever run into to compare me to Buck Owens...interesting choice....I then told Frank that one of my songs ("Bill Gannon's Blues") was specifically produced to sound like an old Owens hi-fi-stereo recording, and he insisted that he spin that song before the interview. As far as I know, it's the only time that particular song has made it to the airwaves. We did a nice 20-minute interview, and off Mike and I drove...

...to downtown Eugene, to the Allann Bros. Coffee Company's "Beanery" at 24th & Hilyard (541-344-0221, contact Liz Bertucci). There are several "Beanery" locations throughout the Willamette Valley, this being the only one I've played at (I also played here in May of 1996). It's a tiny coffeehouse, but there is a small carved-out area with about six tables to which performers play. It is so small that no amplification is needed (although one does feel a bit "naked" without the security of a microphone to play behind). It's right near the college, and lots of folks stopped through to listen. A very good show, aesthetically and financially.

From 24th & Hilyard Mike and I had to rush to the other side of Eugene to appear on Mike Meyer's "Acoustic Junction" on KRVM. KRVM is a 50-year old community radio station licensed to---get this---the local high school district! It's on the campus of a high school! Mama mia! And it is one of the most listened-to radio stations in the area. During the day high schoolers operate the station (held to a very broad Americana format---excellent music, by the way); on nights and weekends the community runs it, and people like Mike Meyer have their own programs. I tell you, if my high school had a radio station on campus, I'd probably be in that business today instead of this one.

I've always been enamored of radio, both as a business and as a medium. Radio is the only artform which is totally based upon the mind of those using it. There are no visual aids (such as a moving picture or an album cover) when you're listening to the radio, so whatever you're listening to lives totally in your head. That is so powerful! The best practitioners of radio understand this, and can build fantastic imaginary "living spaces" for their listeners.

So I'm always jazzed when I'm in a radio station. I keep my watch synchronized to GMT, which is used by most of the radio networks, and I'm always able to time my performances or interviews so that they end on time without being sloppy. For instance, if I'm appearing on a station that uses NPR news, I know that NPR news broadcasts all start at one minute past the hour. This means the station will probably use the one minute between the hour mark and the newscast for station I.D. and promotion for other programs on the station. This, in turn, means, that whatever interview we're doing should end by the hour mark, or just a few seconds afterward. I can time my final song, or final comments of an interview, based on the time remaining. I always have a lot of fun trying to "hit the post" in an orderly manner. The radio people all appreciate it, although they do think I'm a bit batty, I'm sure.

Anyway, back to KRVM--Mike Meyer (e-mail: mmeyer@proaxis.com) runs a really fun show, and he showcases most of the acoustic/folk/singer-songwriters who tour through the area. Right after my interview I headed down the small corridor to the waiting area, where I literally bumped into Laura Kemp, who, carrying her guitar, was heading in the other direction to spend 20 minutes in the studio promoting her show that night in town. We shook hands, shared a few nice words, then on our separate ways we went. A fun, hectic moment.

Mike and I then jumped into the car and drove about an hour back up through Corvallis and into Albany, where I played at Wyatt's Eatery and Brew House (541-917-3727; contact Nancy Coleman). Several folks who had heard me on the radio during the day showed up, which was cool, but only one person bought a CD...the tips were good, though, and the house guarantee made it a good night overall. Plus having Mike with me made the entire day worthwhile---having a friend along who knows me pretty well was a very comfortable experience.

On Friday I was originally scheduled to play in Portland, but the club went out of business, so I used the night to go have dinner with Norma and Frank, who live just outside of Eugene in a lovely wooded area with a pond and a river running through their property.

Norma was my first true love. I met her during the wild summer of 1979. She is the mother of one of my younger brothers' friends. When we met I was 22 years old and she was 42 years old. She was a widow raising four children (the oldest, a daughter, is my age) and going to school toward becoming a therapist, which she eventually became. I was insane in love with her. She had no idea what to do with me. We had a wild, irresponsible, fun, incredibly difficult on-and-off love affair which ended when I moved back to Los Angeles to find fame and fortune the following spring, but continued on-and-off for the next 12 years. I asked her to marry me several times, the last time being around 1991, when I finally understood that we would never be lovers again. But during those 12 years, whenever we saw each other, the same spark was lit when I looked into her eyes, and sometimes---even sometimes when we were in relationships with others---we fell back into each others arms...and beds...

...and now Norma works for the University of Oregon, while at the same time working toward a Ph.D. in philosophy, living with Frank, who she met back in the Bay Area a few years ago. Frank is about the only person I could ever imagine Norma living with...he is as placid and cool as she is wild, contrary and effusive. They seem to be very happy together, and we had a wonderful time.

...and this was the first time---ever---that when I looked into Norma's eyes I felt no spark, only deep love. I can't speak for Norma, but I do know that at that moment, I realized how much I had changed. For now, instead of my love for her being something that pulls me toward her, it is simply love. It used to be that I would follow wherever I thought she was leading. No more. I'm standing on my own. And now *I* am almost 42. The age she was when she first met me. And I see that all along, she never married me all those times I asked because she knew this moment would come. And I love her even more for saying no.

That feeling of being pulled toward Norma applied to all the other women I've ever been intimate with, and it too has subsided since I've begun this journey of making music and songwriting and touring, for the more I discover my own path, the less I've yearned to find that "other" to define who I am. I'm doing that myself.

Being on the road, alone, making my own decisions and facing the consequences of my own choices, is part of who I am, which is why playing this music all over the country, alone, feels so right---like it's exactly what I was born to do. But there are still pieces missing...

There are faces in some of the audiences, faces of women...women who I understand could ease some of the loneliness that comes with this...and yet even when it comes (not very often, thank God, but when it does come, it can be almost physically crippling), I choose to remain alone.

And yes, I choose it, even though I do everything I can to convince myself otherwise. The truth is that sex is everywhere, especially far from home when you're always a visitor. The reason I avoid it is still a mystery, but one that I will solve.

In my last post I spoke of an "emotional gap" that my eating fills. This emotional gap is only partly loneliness for a romantic relationship. It is mostly a hunger for fulfillment, for a sort of bellyful of spiritual satisfaction that is almost filled, but not quite. Finding that "other"---that partner who will complete that circle, might come at any time, or right at the end of my life...in the meantime, I stay aware, always aware...and happy, always happy...and keep making records...and stay on the road...always the road...

Tonight I'll play here in Fort Bragg, then tomorrow I'll head to the Central Valley for a show in Modesto and a visit with my family...then Placerville...then Half Moon Bay...then San Luis Obispo...then home.

The next (and final) post will be (God willing and I don't get too car sick going back over the coastal range) from home. Talk to you then.

NINE
Home

Monday
November 23, 1998
Sierra Madre, California
11:52 p.m. PST
Tripometer: 12,448 miles

Road Mode Recovery 101:

Get everything out of the boxes and into its proper place in the house as quickly as possible.

I am failing Road Mode Recovery 101.

With any luck, I'll pass the course with a C-Minus. If all goes well, the boxes will be emptied and the rental car will be returned by this time tomorrow.....or Wednesday...

I got a head cold just as the trip was ending, and it hit right when I got home, exacerbated by a 25-hour marathon final day. But it was worth it...

On Tuesday the 16th I played at the Headlands Coffeehouse in Fort Bragg (707-964-1987, contact Pete Gealey), another one of those sturdy, well-lit, comfortable coffeehouses that seem to be everywhere nowadays. It was a slow night, but it picked up during the second and third sets. For a mid-week show, the turnout was amazingly full and (even more amazingly) attentive. Lots of "regulars," and this being a beachfront community, that included some rather eccentric regulars (what is it about the ocean that attracts so many eccentric personalities, anyway?...that's for another day...another universe...).

The next day I ventured to Modesto, where I had booked a gig at St. Stan's Brewery (209-524-4782, contact Kevin Dunn) for a cocktail-hour (6:30-9:30) bar show. St. Stan's books a lot of original acts like me, and the ownership is friendly, but this is not the best place to do all-original stuff. I held firm, though, and was bolstered by a raft of family members in the audience (my parents now live in Modesto, and they'd invited a couple of my siblings and their spouses from the Bay Area). In another life I might have been embarrassed to play for my folks in such a loud and inattentive setting, but, hey---they got to see what "paying dues" (for lack of a better expression, and I wish there was one) is all about.

I stayed at my parents' home for the first time in nearly ten years that night and the following night. It was weird, but okay. Quote of the visit was by my mother, who after staring at my hair (now fairly long), finally spoke up when I asked her what was wrong. "Oh, there's nothing wrong honey," she said. "It's just that....well...you have split ends."

Oh.

On to Placerville, where on Friday I played at the Placerville Coffee House (530-642-8481, contact Mike Rideout), an absolutely WONDERFUL place, situated in a former gold mine-turned-soda works-turned-coffee house. The stage is in a separate, large listening room upstairs away from the coffee machinery, and it is a delightful performance space. Paula Joy Welter, who lives in Placerville, recommended the room, and I'm glad she did...unfortunately it was a slow night in town, and despite coverage in the local paper, very few people came out. But--encouragement abounds--those who did show up bought CDs.

During the show in Placerville I felt the first twinge of a cold coming on. When I left the venue I went right to the nearest supermarket and got some cold medication, along with the makings of a salad, which made me feel a little better, but by the time I got to bed (around 12:30 a.m.) I was shivering from a fever. So I tossed and turned for the next four hours...then I got up at 4:30 a.m. for the final day of the tour.

I drove straight to San Francisco, where I picked up John-Michael Kaye at the Greyhound station. I had paid for the bus ticket before I left on the trip, knowing I'd want John to play guitar with me on the tour's final day. John, ever the trouper, agreed, even though I could pay him very little and despite the fact that I could barely squeeze him into the car (I had abandoned the ice chest at my parents' home two days before so there would be room for John in the passenger seat--I'll retrieve it when I visit for Christmas)--John's guitar case just made it into the mess in the back seat).

We drove to Half Moon Bay for an 11 a.m. show at La Di Da (650-726-1663, contact Liz). La Di Da is a fairly raucous, open-during-the-day-only coffee house just blocks from the ocean. Half Moon Bay is still as funky and slightly weird as I remember it. The venue itself has a "fun" atmosphere about it, and it has a very good stage in front of a large window facing the street. When John and I arrived, we hooked up with Tim Cupps, who joined us on bass for the day's two shows. The show at La Di Da went terrifically, and a whole bunch of friends from Northern California showed up, making the whole affair pure joy. And there were also a lot of walk-ins who sat down and listened. I did very well in the CD sales department. The band sounded sooooo good....

This is the next phase I must deal with...my goal is to tour with other musicians as soon as I can afford it. The key, of course, is being able to afford it. It can be very frustrating knowing how much better the music sounds, how much better it's presented, with a band...on the other hand, I could tell how much better a performer I had become when I played with these two superb musicians...anyway, in the end I understood that for the foreseeable future I'll have to tour alone (mostly), and that the time will come soon enough when I earn enough to afford to take other musicians with me...and I just enjoyed the moment...

...and the ultimate moment came that night.

After the show at La Di Da, John, Tim and I drove down to San Luis Obispo for the final show of the tour at Linnaea's Cafe (805-541-5888, contact Michael Moore at 805-595-2633), where I have now played at least six times over the past five years.

Linnaea's is *the* place for touring acoustic musicians in SLO. The performance space is intimate, and set apart from the main serving area. When the room is full of people listening to the music, it is a truly special place to play.

San Luis Obispo, and the Central Coast generally, is the one region of the country where my music has been played consistently since my first CD came out. It started with a DJ named Jim Mueller, who played my first CD a LOT when it first came out on his Saturday afternoon show on KCBX, which is heard from Paso Robles to Santa Barbara. When he left the show, his successor, Sonnie Brown, continued to play my records, and then DJs on the other two music shows on the station began playing them, too. As a result, I actually have *fans* in the area.

...and there they were at Linnaea's on Saturday night. Many of these people were folks I'd seen at other shows; at least half were people I had never met before. John, Tim and I played our hearts out, and it was a real blast. I'm still at the phase of my career when most of the shows I play are for people who I'm trying to "win over," who haven't heard my songs before. When I play on the Central Coast, there are people in the audience who I don't know....singing along with my songs. Here I can experience the thing that is at the core of my goal...playing for people who know my music, who I can relax and have fun with onstage. And that's what we did that night...I was, at this point, sick as a dog, but I didn't feel a thing when the music was playing...

...and so we packed up...Tim stayed the night in SLO before heading back to San Jose the next day; John and I got in the car and drove back to L.A.

I finally got to bed at 5:30 a.m., some 25 hours after rising in Placerville. I slept like a stone, woke up for a few hours, then fell into another deep sleep. At one point overnight I woke up asking myself where I was...let's see, what week is this...am I in Oregon? No, wait, Wisconsin? Which motel room is this?

No, wait...

...I'm home.

Home. After eight weeks. Home. After 12,000 miles across a big rock called North America which with each trip is shrinking in my consciousness to an island...one day in Salt Lake City, in a blink of an eye in Ann Arbor, just a few days later in Pennsylvania, the very next day in Wisconsin...

Home. After all the songs sung to empty rooms, to full houses, to the woman in the third row who started crying in the third verse of a song I'd almost forgotten why I wrote, to the man in San Luis who sobbed during almost every tune, to the little kids who danced, who laughed when they weren't "supposed" to, who stopped and stared and *made* mom or dad stop what they were doing and watch the big loud man with the guitar singing something about love, something about the road, something about...something...which the big loud man might never have realized still meant something without that small face transfixed on his...

Home. After all the daytime/late evening work for my day job, doing paralegal work, writing contracts, making phone calls, drafting letters to insurance companies and pleading responses to attorneys one moment, making calls to coffeehouses for my spring tour the next, wondering when I'll find the time to write a new song, thanking God that I have the job and the people at that job who support me, wondering when and how that day job will end...worrying...planning...working...

Home. After all the gas stations and the Regular Tacos and the Snickers bars and the hot coffee in the middle of the night listening to a radio station far, far away...

...and it's home. And for the first time since I started touring I don't feel the letdown, as if I'm back from a long vacation...it's just not that way anymore. I'm home for four months, and then I'll be out again for four months...and then I'll be home for three months, and then I'll be out again for...how long? Who knows? I'll be out, though. More and more. I have become what I set out to become. And I'm learning what I'll become afterward. Jesus, I feel scared. And alive. And free.

And, for now, home.

Postscripts:

Before bowing out, I want to thank Tom Ianniello for asking me to do this. It's been a revelation and a great gift to be able to let my brain leak like this every week or so during this trip. Somehow pouring this all out has taught me a lot in the process. Mostly, though, it has been an *honor* to hear back from so many of you, and to engage in some very meaningful dialogue. I had no idea what to expect when I started sending these posts; the love and support I received in response to them has been mind-boggling, and it will stay with me always.

I also want to acknowledge the people who have been reading these notes on the Dan Bern e-mail list. I found out only recently that they had been posted to that list (to which I do not subscribe). If any of you on the DanList have sent any responsive posts to that server and I haven't responded, it's only because I don't get them sent to me...but I have felt your presence. Several of my messages have inspired replies which were forwarded all over the Internet, and have come back to me in interesting ways.

Thanks for sharing this ride with me. We will talk again. Probably sooner than any of us think.

Until then---keep busy, okay?

Love
Mark

The Spring/Summer 1999 Tour

TEN

Getting On With It

So Tom Ianniello---that bastard---sent me the Dreaded E-Mail.

As the final week at home approached in late March, I had become, finally, confident that it was a good idea *not* to write any more of these missives, at least during this tour. The nine messages I sent from the road last autumn had turned into something more than I ever could have expected, after all, and I figured it would be tempting fate (and perhaps the patience of the iguanaland-list subscribers) to continue sending them on this long, four-month trip.

Also, it was easy for me to let those nine messages from the fall tour stand alone as a sort of freak occurrence; something that was unexpected and therefore something that deserved to stand on its own, without continuation. When Tom asked me to write "notes from the road" I didn't expect it to turn into what it became---an opportunity to talk to myself and learn, with all of you looking over my shoulder, what a tremendous amount of change this lifestyle has brought to bear on the way I live, the way I think, the way I perceive. But that's what happened. And it affected the four months that followed, back home, which took on cinematic proportions at times.

The first thing I noticed upon my return to L.A. was how many people I now know. Because so many of you communicated with me during the course of the fall tour, I was presented with a very clear picture of the number of friends I've made over the past five years. This was astounding and very gratifying, to know there is such a large community of artists---all good people!---who share so much in a place that is generally thought of as being cold and self-centered.

Then Kathleen Hietala passed away, and we all came together in a way that, again, was stunning in its simplicity, warmth and love.

On the practical side, I had to put together my new CD and get it released in time for the spring, which involved less work and more financial worry than any of the previous albums.

And of course, Tom opened Exile in January, continuing the cycle of friendship, art and mutual support that seemed to fill the air all of a sudden...

But, mostly, the entire period I spent home this winter was consumed with an incredible, beautiful and totally unique woman with whom I fell in love so deeply and completely that it spins my head even now. The details aren't important here, except to say that that relationship, and its aftermath of confusion and misunderstanding, continues to color everything I do.

...oh, and then just a couple of days before I left I was interviewed by a columnist for the Los Angeles *Times*, who will be writing a column on love songs...seen through my songs...and he interviewed me heavily about my love life...we'll see how *that* turns out...

...so I left on this, my most ambitious tour yet, with a lot of baggage, a lot of which is financial (heavy worries about money continue to grow as I pursue this---more on that in later posts), but most of which is that ol' ennui, hanging over my head like a rain cloud that refuses to rain...

....in short, as you can see, I was overthinking things.

When I was 23 years old I had a brief, disastrous but ultimately worthwhile love affair with a woman who, in the midst of one of our pained arguments, slapped me silly, metaphorically, with what might have been the single greatest bit of advice I ever got. I've decided it would do me good to heed that advice now.

As I whined and droned on dramatically about all my inner worries, all the spiritual and emotional pain she and I were going through, she interrupted me mid-sentence and said "Stop complaining. You think too much. Do what you need to do. GET ON WITH IT."

Pow.

...and so on the second day of this new tour, I logged on to my computer, and there was the Dreaded E-Mail, a message from Tom, that sweet little bastard, telling me he was looking forward to more notes from this tour. And I thought...get on with it. See what happens.

So here I am again, and I'll be sending these notes whenever it seems appropriate and when I have the time. As always, I welcome your thoughts, both privately and on the iguanaland-list. I'm sure you'll all know when and if this becomes tedious--and I have no doubt you'll let me know.

Tom will, in any event.

Monday
April 12, 1999
Mobile, Alabama
9:05 p.m. CDT
Tripometer: 6,507 miles

Four months.

Four straight months, seventy-three live shows, fifteen (at least) radio shows. Some of the nuttiest drives I've yet attempted. And then home for a month...and back out for three more. That's the plan anyway.

This evening I took a walk here in Mobile. It was an absolutely stunning sunset, the sky was crystal blue, there was hardly any humidity (a rarity around these parts)...a perfect moment to contemplate this insanity...and I have to say it made me feel pretty good.

Because of the aforementioned ennui, I was sort of in a haze while packing for this trip, and didn't really get it all done until a couple of days before I left. Plus, getting started on this tour was just plain...well, try this:

Saturday 3/27: Drive to San Francisco with John-Michael Kaye and Lisa Johnson...perform in San Francisco that night, drive straight home, drop off Lisa and John...get to bed by Sunday at 7 a.m., sleep for a few hours, get up, load the rental car with full tour gear, sleep a few more hours...

Monday 3/29, leave Sierra Madre at midnight, drive straight to Tucson, do a 10 a.m. radio interview, then drive straight to the University of Arizona for a lunchtime show, then get back into the car to drive six more hours to El Paso, Texas.

Tuesday 3/30, drive 850 miles across Texas to Beaumont.

Wednesday 3/31, drive 750 miles to Tallahassee, Florida.

Thursday 4/1, drive 650 miles to Tampa, do a 10 a.m. radio interview, get back into the car and drive to Fort Lauderdale, 450 miles away, where I finally unload the car completely because I'm finally in one place for three straight days.

And don't forget, when I arrived at my various destinations, there was day job work to be done, which means setting up the computer, the printer, making phone calls, etc....overall not conducive to large amounts of sleep.

I drove from one coast to the next in less than four days. Talk about your culture shock.

Friends, if you don't know it all ready, let me tell you: Florida is a strange place. Its architecture, its freeways, its cultural diversity (especially in Tampa and South Florida), its "wide openness"---are all very much reminiscent of Los Angeles...

But it's all built on swamp land. So even when the weather is moderate (as it was most of the last two weeks when I was there), it is very very very (very) humid, which lends a sort of "desperate" air to everything and everyone. My impression is that every one is just a little annoyed all the time down there, which makes doing anything seem like a tactical assault. Or it could just be me.

This is particularly interesting in that all along the Gulf Coast (like here, in Mobile), where the heat and humidity can get even worse than Florida, the weather has the opposite effect, and seems to turn the populace into the most slow-moving, easygoing folks you'd ever want to know. Why things seem so...urgent...in Florida remains a mystery to me...perhaps with more visits this impression will change...maybe...

I played 8 shows and did 2 radio shows over the past two weeks in Florida. The shows were all at Borders stores, with the exception of Saturday the 3rd, when I played for the Folk Club of South Florida (contact Valerie Carracapa at 305-891-3528) at a really cool little place called the Luna Star Cafe in North Miami.

The Luna Star is owned by a totally cool woman named Alexis, who, as it turned out, was the biggest reason the Folk Club booked me at her club.

She is a fan of my music, which I didn't expect to find down there where I haven't gotten much exposure. But it was sure good for my ego to start the tour off with such an enthusiastic club owner! Alexis continuously interrupted my stage patter with exaltations and sales pitches, encouraging the audience to buy my CDs...and I sold a lot of them that night!

The next day was Easter, and I had to drive to Tampa to play an afternoon show...but it turned out that Alexis, and her boyfriend Keith, were also driving to Tampa to spend Easter with Keith's parents. So on the Monday after Easter, the three of us got together at a place in Tampa called Ybor City, which is an old part of town famous for its cigar factories. It's now a very big tourist attraction, but during the day (when we were there) it's like a ghost town, and there's still lots to do.

Alexis, Keith and I walked all over Ybor City, led mostly by Alexis, whose enthusiasm and quirky...what I'd call "sense of the fabulous" for lack of a better phrase...made the whole day turn into an adventure. The neatest place we explored was the old Italian-American Social Club Hall, built in 1894, and loaded with all sorts of hidden nooks and crannies. A really great way to spend a few hours.

I basically drove back and forth all over Florida the past two weeks, playing my shows, with one exception....that was on Saturday...

Okay, so if you decide you want to make a living doing the touring folk singer thing, there are a number of rules to live by, which I'll generally cover in these posts...today's rule is an offshoot of my "Club Owners/Weasels" theory which I propounded in one of my messages last fall...

Essentially it's this: Most club owners are just like you...they're in it because they like doing it and they don't make a lot of money at it. This means that, while they're usually okay as people, the business end of things can sometimes turn them into rodents.

Here's my latest example: I intended to stay in Florida the first two weeks of April. But then I learned of a club (which will remain nameless) in Gulfport, Mississippi that had folk music on weekends and paid well. Turns out I heard right---they booked me on Saturday the 10th for a very large guarantee (one of the largest I've ever gotten). The booking meant that I would have to drive from Jacksonville Florida to Gulfport (450 miles), do the show, then drive from Gulfport to Miami (800 miles) for a Sunday night show...but I was willing to do it because of the good \$\$\$...

...and then I learned that Taylor Caffery, who hosts "The General Store" on WRKF-FM in Baton Rouge (e-mail Taylor at *The-General-Store@compuserve.com*) had an opening for a live guest during the day on the 10th...I needed to publicize my appearance in Baton Rouge later in the month...Baton Rouge is only two hours west of Gulfport....so I booked the live radio show with Taylor for 2 p.m., the plan being to leave Jacksonville early in the morning, drive to Baton Rouge, do the radio show, head back east to Gulfport for the evening gig, then drive to Miami for the next night's show. Crazy, yes. But worth it since a big payday was involved.

And then three days before I left on the tour I got a call from the co-owner of the club in Gulfport, name of Jim, informing me that the remodeling of the club wouldn't be finished in time for my show, so he'd have to cancel.

There are no words sufficient to describe the amount of restraint I showed in not hiring a large, heavily-muscled man to kidnap Jim, drive him to one of the many fine alligator-infested swamps in the region and introduce him to some Reptile Love.

Man, I needed that money. And now I was stuck with no show, and a radio booking I had to fulfill. So on Saturday I drove from Jacksonville to Baton Rouge then back to Miami (with a stop in Pensacola to sleep for a few hours). Lots of gasoline. Lots of Miles. No income.

Yes, I could take Jim to small claims court. But at what cost? It just wouldn't be worth the trouble, especially since I'd be hundreds or thousands of miles away when the court date came around. No, instead I'm listening to that voice of the ex-girlfriend...."get on with it," she says...and God bless her, she's right.

This whole process is about getting on with it, moving on, not looking back very much. Forward progress is sometimes the only thing that makes any sense out here, so far from anything that seems like home...until finally the road becomes a second home...

Just two weeks into this trip and already I'm on my second rental car (that story later) and over 6,000 miles traveled. There will come a moment...soon, I think...when I will look through the windshield and realize that I've forgotten what it felt like to worry about all I was worrying about back home...for now I'll just get on with it. Let's see what comes along.

ELEVEN
Songs of the South

Wednesday
April 28, 1999
Slidell, Louisiana
7:40 a.m. CDT
Tripometer: 11,766 miles

Humkfert.

Last night some guy named Mark Humkfert was scheduled to play the Neutral Ground Coffee House in New Orleans. He didn't show so I played instead.

As you may have guessed, getting one's name misspelled is but one of the many vagaries of this lifestyle choice, and mine gets trampled all the time, but because my surname is fairly easy to pronounce, there are really only two common mistakes---either it's spelled with an "ies" instead of an "eys" at the end, or people just leave off the "s," assuming, I suppose, that I'm some distant relative of the late senator from Minnesota.

But "Humkfert"---now that's so far gone it's just plain exquisite. I told the guy behind the bar I felt like I should be playing a polka. He pulled out a squeeze box from behind the counter, but no one in the room knew how to operate it, so I just played my own songs. Solo.

I've now been on the road for four weeks and two days, with just a little over thirteen weeks left to go. I've spent the entire month of April in the Southern U.S., and as you can see from the tripometer reading, logged almost 12,000 miles already.

Actually, the mileage figure is a combination of miles from two automobiles.

I rent my cars from a major rental company's outlet in Pasadena. Debbie, the woman who runs the franchise there is a wonderful person who has been providing me with my tour cars from the very beginning, back in 1995. She knows that my favorite compact cars are, in order, the Toyota Corolla/Chevy Prism (which are the same car with different names) and the Chevy Cavalier. I prefer the Corolla/Prism because of the fact that it has cruise control, which is invaluable on long drives. Plus both the Corolla/Prism and the Cavalier get around 30 to 35 miles to the gallon on the open road, and with gasoline prices rising it seemed doubly important on this tour to get a non-gas guzzler. Debbie always gives me a phenomenally low rate with unlimited mileage (which, obviously, is crucial) and sort of treats me like a rock star, which is good for the ego when about to embark on one of these trips.

This time when I showed up at the rental lot, Debbie had a surprise for me. She had told me that she had reserved a Prism for me, but instead what I found was a muscle car---a Dodge Avenger! A jazzy, bright red, Dodge Avenger! In her well-intentioned quest to do me a favor, she had bumped me up in class to the Avenger (which, yes, had cruise control all right) at the compact car rate.

It had plenty of room for all my stuff, but it was a two-door (which makes loading and unloading a bit unwieldy) and, of course, I was very concerned about the gas mileage. I just couldn't turn Debbie down after her sweet gesture, so I took the Avenger and headed off across the continent.

As it turned out, the Avenger got about 27 miles to the gallon by my calculation, and gasoline prices outside California still hover anywhere between 93 cents to \$1.25 a gallon. So I figured I'd keep it.

Then two weeks into the trip I was in Baton Rouge to do a radio interview, and the air conditioning crapped out. I figured this was my opportunity to get a more "responsible" car for the remainder of the tour, so before I hit the airwaves I drove to the rental firm's outlet at the Baton Rouge airport to exchange vehicles.

Not only did they *not* have any compact cars at all, all they had was...get this...a brand new (and by this I mean only 400 miles on it) Buick Century. Green. Big. This is not your father's car. This is your grandfather's car. I shuddered at the thought of all the gasoline I'd be wasting...but it was a "take it or leave it" deal, and it was warm and muggy in Baton Rouge, so I transferred all my stuff from the Avenger to the Century (leaving behind in the process the charm bracelet Brian Prosser had made for me last year, which I'm still crushed over) and drove off.

To my surprise the Century gets at least as good gas mileage as the Avenger did, and...well...excuse me for admitting it, but it's so damned *comfortable!* Drives like a breeze, and because it's big and green and a Buick for God's sake, cops practically ignore it (knock on wood), figuring, I guess, that it's someone's granddad at the wheel. Whatever. And still at the ridiculously low monthly fee that Debbie originally charged! Needless to say, I'm keeping it for now. Once I get to the Northeast I'll gauge gas prices, and if they're too high I'll try again to exchange for an actual compact car. In the meantime, I'm one mean, green BIG touring machine.

Since my last post, I've played nine shows in 16 days...not the best days-to-shows ratio, but I'm still building up my contacts down in this part of the country.

On Wednesday the 14th I headed into Dallas, where I spent a thoroughly enjoyable day with my friend Amy, who is now a stay-at-home mother with her daughter Samantha. I knew Amy from the days when one of my friends went to school at UC/Irvine and lived in a house on Balboa Island. I used to go down there every other weekend to hang out and drink heavily...Amy was the girlfriend of Phill, one of my friend's room mates. Phill is now a doctor living in Billings, Montana (I wrote about Phill last October). As it turns out, although Amy and Phill didn't last as a couple, Amy ended up marrying a doctor anyway. Jorge is his name, and he works at Parkland Hospital in Dallas, specializing in cardiovascular radiology.

It's interesting, having known someone for such a long time, to have the perspective of those years when I notice where we've all ended up. When I first knew Amy, we were all young, usually foolish, kids. Today Amy lives in a big house in a very fashionable Dallas neighborhood, married to a successful physician, but---and perhaps this is just because we knew each other at such a radically different time in our lives---it really doesn't feel all that different spending time with her now than it did all those years ago. At one point she pulled out a scrapbook that had some photos of us all during those two summers down on Balboa...we all looked so different, but it was like walking into my past seeing them...time felt seamless as the tastes and sounds of that time came rushing back.

That night I played at Poor David's Pub in Dallas (contact David at 214-821-9891), which is one of the big folk-folk/rock-Americana clubs in town. It was not a good night audience-wise, and I opened for an act that was not really compatible for my music...that said, it is a great room with a good stage and nice sound system. I'm hoping I can come back next year and open another show, hopefully on a weekend.

I then headed for Columbus, Georgia, where I played at The Loft (contact Donnie Lanier at 706-562-9792), another folk/rock pub, upstairs above the main street in town. I really liked the room, and (this is great when it happens) drew a good number of people into the listening room after I started playing. I opened for another act that wasn't really compatible (this seems to be a common problem), but the crowd liked me and the manager and I discussed the possibility of my coming back next year as a featured act during their weekly open mic, which would be a far more appropriate setting.

It was then on to a Borders store in Memphis, where I've now played three times, all to good responses. This time I was actually approached by the music manager, who asked if he could carry my CDs...uh...I said yes. Next it was off to Norman, Oklahoma for another Borders store on a Sunday afternoon, where I actually had a couple of fans in attendance...always good for morale...

Then it was back eastward, to North Carolina for five days, where I spent an hour talking and playing during a community radio fundraiser, on WFSS-FM in Fayetteville on Wednesday the 21st. That night I had dinner at the house of Jim Graves, who hosts the folk programming on WFSS. Jim just loves music, and he has managed to get some pretty big names to come through Fayetteville on their way to other places. Plus he's just a nice man...meeting people like Jim Graves is probably the best part of touring.

On the 22nd I played at The Skylight Exchange in Chapel Hill (contact Dennis at 919-933-5550), where I was double-booked with a benefit concert because the person I'd booked my show with had left the country suddenly and left no information behind...Dennis, the owner, was gracious enough to cancel the benefit and let me play, but of course the posters I'd sent had not been put up and there had been no publicity, so I played to a very small room. Despite that, this is a very good place to play and, as I say, the owner is honorable, so I'll try to arrange something there again next year, now that they know who I am. This is one of the things that is hardest to do...when stuff like this happens, it's best not to get angry, but rather try to find whatever positives you can...it's hard, especially after driving a long distance to find out no one knows who I am...but I've found that if I keep my head things usually work out. The teeth do get ground down a bit, though...

My favorite spot in North Carolina (so far) is in the small town of Sylva, where The City Lights Book Store and Cafe (contact Joyce Moore at 828-586-9466) sits up on a hill, and where some really great songwriters play. The cafe pays a small guarantee, but the clientele expects music on Fridays and Saturdays, and if they like you they tip well and buy CDs (I guess they liked me--I did really well). It's a small cafe setting, but the music is respected and the vibe is extremely positive. Plus it's in the mountains of North Carolina...so breathtakingly beautiful that during my break I almost lost track of time admiring the beauty all around.

On Saturday night I was double booked again (!!!) at Drips Coffee House in Hickory. But this was a most pleasant experience. Not only did the owners, Dave and Mary Hoyle (phone 828-324-1644) apologize for the misunderstanding; not only did they let me open for the double-booked act; they also paid me the agreed-upon guarantee and passed the hat for me, resulting in one of the best financial evenings so far this trip. And the room is GREAT--the place fills to the rafters after around 9:00 p.m. and the audience is very receptive. Highly recommended.

***** *****

...which led me to the Neutral Ground in New Orleans last night, where I filled in for the notorious Mark Humkfert. This is one of the coolest spots I've yet played. It's an old bar that's been in New Orleans for close to a hundred years. The Neutral Ground now operates the space as a cooperative, presenting folk music and storytelling events in a totally folk-friendly environment. There are no guarantees, but the hat is always passed, and you never know what or who you're going to run into. If you're a folkish player coming through town, you do not want to miss the opportunity to play there (contact Ken Swartz at his home: 504-314-8251 for booking; venue telephone is 504-891-3381).

I arrived early at the Neutral Ground, and the manager, August, was just opening up. I hadn't eaten dinner and asked him where I could go in the neighborhood. He directed me to a local Mexican restaurant about half a mile away, and I proceeded on foot.

It had just gotten dark, and the air was thick and fragrant with the blooming flora that only bloom in the South. It was still almost 80 degrees, and combined with the humidity and the tiny streets and old houses all around me, the temperature added the final touch of mystery, of suspense, of...I don't know...mild, undefinable *panic* that surges through New Orleans. Everything there is *old*--the buildings, the streets, the street lights. Strange possibilities seem to exist everywhere. It's really hard to define it without experiencing it.

And the food! I know you're probably wondering why I didn't seek out a Cajun restaurant instead of the Mexican place...it's because I knew that no matter where I went the food would be excellent. Like San Francisco, a restaurant cannot survive in New Orleans if it isn't excellent.

So I had the best Mexican meal I've had since leaving L.A.--and oh my dear sweet Jesus it is so nice to be in a place where people actually eat spicy food! Outside of California and the Southwest, there are few places in this country where you can get food that's really hot. For someone who grew up eating hot peppers at every meal, the bland palette of the rest of the country can get quite annoying. It was nice not to be looked at as a raving lunatic when I asked for fresh jalapeno to be grilled with my fajitas.

Anyway, I'm getting out of town today before I stuff myself stupid...it's going to be difficult driving through downtown on my way out and not stopping somewhere for some gumbo...

The big thing about the South--Florida and the Gulf Coast in particular--is water.

Water everywhere. Water lurking just beyond the interstate in the Gulf. Water underneath the interstate, as it travels for miles and miles and miles over swampland (you wanna be creeped out--try driving on a roadway elevated over alligator-infested bayous and swamps, with nowhere to stop if your car breaks down). Water in the air, constantly turning the atmosphere into a wall of resistance.

In Tampa, there are long stretches of road that span the Gulf of Mexico itself. Here, as you approach New Orleans from the east, I-10 goes right through the middle of Lake Pontchartrain for several miles...and it's not a big elevated bridge...you're right there, level with the water, with no shoreline in sight. It took me a few times going over that stretch before I even began to get used to it.

Today I'll cross that bridge one more time on my way to Baton Rouge, where I play tonight. I'll be in the South for another week before I move on to the Northeast for May, the busiest month of the tour. Breathe deep....

During my show at Drips Coffeehouse in Hickory last week, three high school kids walked in, two boys and a girl, all decked out for the Junior/Senior Prom. I talked to them from the stage, and we had fun going back and forth. They told me they were Juniors, and that they'd just stopped in for some coffee before heading to the prom. The boys, as they do at that age, looked awkward and a little out of sorts in their rented tuxes. The girl was absolutely radiant in her evening gown, her beauty so far beyond the comprehension of her companions that they had that look of confusion boys always get when they encounter it for the first time, trying to act as they normally do but absolutely in awe of this beautiful young woman they were with. Many of the people in the audience smiled as they walked out, no doubt remembering their own youth.

They were nice kids. And it was a comfort to see them at the end of a week when high school kids have been in the news under such tragic circumstances; a comfort to be reminded that despite all the attention one horrifying act can draw, in every corner of this country the vast majority of kids are what they've always been, and will always be. Kids. And right now, all over the country, they're going to the prom, decked out--perhaps for the first time--as the adults they will soon be expected to be, gleaned that first inkling that something bigger, more important, more scary, more beautiful, lies beyond.

This is the ultimate reward of traveling this country--to step out of the confines of one place and to recognize that all that ever was continues to be, and that, in the most important ways, all is well.

TWELVE
High Fibers

Saturday
May 15, 1999
Henrietta, New York
2:38 p.m. EDT
Tripometer: 15,970 miles

***** *****

It has been far, far too long since we last communicated. Over two weeks now. Time gets so compressed out here that it's easy to lose track of it. This might be a long message, and if so I encourage the reader to skip ahead whenever it feels appropriate...or delete the whole damn thing if it gets too tedious...

The weather here in Rochester (Henrietta is a suburb of Rochester, home of our beloved Leader, Tom [fill in the blank] Ianniello) is delightful, just as it has been this entire week, which I've spent mostly in New England...more about that in a minute.

I had committed to myself that today I was *not* going to do anything but relax. Not going to update my tax receipts. Not going to make any booking calls. Not going to write any confirmation letters...although all those things need to be done. I realized last night that no matter what, there is always something to do, and I had better take at least one day off sometime soon or I was going to go nuts. So I decided that I wasn't going to do anything today except write this note...then, of course, as I fell asleep last night, I thought "well, *maybe* the receipts...*maybe* I can get in a couple of calls..."

I awoke this morning with a splitting sinus headache. God's way of telling me to shut up and lie down. So I took a pill and went back to bed and I've been lounging all day. The headache's gone, I feel pretty relaxed, I've got four hours until I have to get ready for tonight's show...so I guess I had my day off whether I liked it or not.

***** *****

Much has happened in these two-plus weeks, and most of it has been entirely in atmosphere, mind and heart. It's like a switch has been pulled, and I'm suddenly, totally ensconced in this lifestyle. Los Angeles is now the place I'm *from* as opposed to the place where I *live*, and living on the road is as natural and easy to understand, psychically, as waking, working, eating and sleeping anywhere, any time. For the first time, ever, being on tour doesn't have even the remote feel of being on "vacation," or being "away." Work and everyday living have finally merged into a total lifestyle.

Don't get me wrong--it's still a difficult ride, practically speaking, and I still miss the friends and loved ones who are back in Los Angeles, but it's getting harder and harder to call L.A. "home" anymore, other than as a reference point; a compass to gauge my direction at any given moment. New people and new experiences are popping up at every turn, and I'm opening up to them like I never thought I would. Plus--and this is the real kicker--I can see my career actually developing into something recognizable. Like, wow.

Okay, enough with the atmospheric. Let's get down to some details.

The entire month of April, I see now in retrospect, was like that crawling-through-molasses dream where everything is *just* out of reach and you *just* can't quite get to it. I was so wrapped up in all I left behind in L.A. and worried so much about my finances and other incidental bothers that I wasn't totally focused. Plus there were so many snafues and annoyances with some of the gigs that I was rather out of sorts much of the time. But toward the end of the month things started to pick up.

On April 28 I traveled back to Baton Rouge to play at M's Fine and Mellow Cafe (contact Marian at 225-344-5368), the one and only small club in town that features acoustic music. Marian is a splendid lady who absolutely loves music and treats touring musicians with great respect. The guarantee is low, but she has a good crowd that shows up (when it decides to) and supports the music very nicely. I came away with more money than I average on any normal Wednesday night gig.

The next night I played at a monthly event called the "Marietta Music Hall" in Marietta Georgia (contact Michael Manely at 770-421-0808), hosted by the local Unitarian Universalist Church. One of hundreds of folk societies around the country, this group has some phenomenal artists come through every month and I was fortunate enough to be able to open for Peter Keane, a songwriter from Austin who plays some of the sweetest guitar I've heard in a long time. Peter was the first "established" performer I opened for, which is something I'm hoping to do more of in order to introduce myself to the larger folk/acoustic audience. As it turned out, the weather, which had just gotten really nice, kept people away that night, but even with a small crowd I sold a number of CDs and got some new names on my mailing list.

The next two days were real tests of my fiber.

I had arranged to play at a bar in northern Georgia, where I had played last year, with the owner of the club. I didn't have a contract with the guy, but I was pretty clear that we had negotiated an understanding that if the crowd was good, I'd get a decent percentage of the door. But when I showed up, the owner was nowhere to be found and the staff had no instructions to pay me anything. Now remember, financial worries are *always* hanging over whatever I'm doing out here (I'm going to talk about that in my next message I think), and I was counting on at least a hundred, if not a couple hundred, bucks that night.

So now I was getting the vibe that they weren't going to pay me anything, and I was *this* close to throwing a fit and walking out. The fact that I didn't is testimony to how...er...pragmatic I've become. I told the manager in charge that okay, look, I won't make a scene or be a jerk about it, but I hope he'd be fair. This lightened the atmosphere greatly, and he then let me know that the owner did this sort of thing all the time, and he was as frustrated as I was...okay so now I was *simpatico* with the manager...so I did the show (three sets), there were lots of people...and at the end of the night I got 20 bucks. Plus thirty from tips. I was not happy. But I just left. Best that I did.

On Sunday I had a booking at a Borders store in Atlanta, but when I called to get directions, they hadn't heard of me. There was no booking.

Now here's the thing to remember about Borders: Each store books separately. Some of them insist on using company protocol, which consists of a form contract and a W-9 that must be signed to confirm the booking. Other Borders locations, however, pay cash and use no written contract whatsoever. So just because one particular store doesn't send a contract doesn't mean they've lost the booking.

But at this particular store they insist on the company protocol, and despite the fact that I sent a confirming letter back when I made the booking, they told me over the phone that I wasn't booked and that I should not come in. The Community Relations Coordinator who I'd made the booking with was out of town, so I couldn't talk to him. The day manager I spoke with on the phone was polite but terse.

I guess you could say that I was terse but polite...emphasis on terse. I had reached as close to a boiling point as I could get without exploding---all the incompetence that you have to deal with in this business finally caught up with me...I was not going to just drop the gig after I'd done everything I was supposed to. So I informed the manager that I was coming in at 3:00 to play my show, and I expected that somehow, some way, I would get paid. Period. I think my calm-yet-shuddering, way-too-low-and-imposing voice must have jolted him, because he said he'd have someone call me back.

Sure enough, within ten minutes the Assistant CRC was on the phone with me. Someone, somewhere had told him that a crazy man was coming in at 3 and that he'd better do something. He found my confirmation letter, told me that there was nothing he could do, he didn't know how his boss had lost my booking, but he had, and there was already another act playing at noon who they had committed to pay.

I launched into the most eloquent, non-threatening diatribe you've ever heard in your life. I pleaded fairness. I pleaded honor. I pleaded to his sense of decency and goodwill.

I told him that I'd play for free that day as long as I could play at the appointed hour, which had been on my calendar for six months, if necessary, but that I expected that somehow he'd find a way to pay me something at some point, since he and I both knew it was the right thing to do. He said to go ahead and come in, but that he couldn't promise any pay, ever.

When I got to the store, he met me and proposed a solution---I would play for free that day, but he would sign a contract with me right there on the spot for a future Sunday---for double the normal fee. An honorable solution, indeed. I had a free Sunday in June, and I'd be within driving distance, so we cut the deal.

But oh, my friends, by this point all the work and struggle had caught up with me, and I was emotionally drained and physically exhausted...and in a rotten mood. The next couple of days I spent picking fights with friends (via e-mail, no less, an interesting way to be a jerk), whining and complaining and just generally being sour.

I finally got an e-mail from one of the people I'd been fussy with, a measured and direct kick in the teeth from someone who loved me enough to tell me to knock it off that set me straight again and snapped me out of my funk...a couple full nights' sleep also helped. And from that point forward the shift began. I looked around and realized where I was. And I began heading north.

The last show in the Southern U.S. was on May 6 in West Columbia South Carolina at a club that, beginning next month, will no longer feature touring songwriters. That's a drag, because it's a great place, but it's just too expensive for the owners to keep doing it, especially on Thursday nights, which is when they had live music.

After the show was over I went straight to my motel, loaded the car, and drove overnight to Albany New York, where I had a show the next night. 850 miles. Only one Sleep Bomb, which required one-and-a-half hours of sleep. It was no sweat--I really surprised myself. I think my body has gotten used to all this driving...or I've just lost a few more brain cells...whatever.

Moving from the South to the Northeast is a fascinating experience. It really happens quickly. Heading up I-81, first you're in Virginia, then West Virginia, then Maryland, then...Pennsylvania and hey! This ain't Baton Rouge, honey. Just like that. The scenery changes. The accents change. The sweaty, "hi-y'all" southern atmosphere is suddenly a dense and distant northeastern wariness (and I don't mean unfriendly, just wary). Driving overnight from one region to another is stunning.

And---bang---there I was in Albany, in a Motel 6 filled to the rafters with attendees of a big Amway convention. I'm not even going to go off on that one, folks...neither you nor I have the time. Suffice it to say that someday a cultural anthropologist will study what exactly it is that turns plain, quiet suburbanites into Kings and Queens of the Bacchanal when they get into a cheap motel room a few hundred miles from home...

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When I first decided to start touring, the first place I came was the Northeast, because I knew this is where music---acoustic music in particular---is appreciated more than anywhere in the country. Knowing it and experiencing it, however, are two different things.

Unlike anywhere else in the U.S., when you're in New England there is just about always---*always*---somewhere to go on the FM radio dial to hear good, original music by a wide range of artists. On any given Saturday morning you can take a drive and within the span of an hour you'll have listened to five or six different radio stations---some small, some big---playing acoustic music of some sort. Coming from the Radio Hell of L.A., it seems like paradise on earth. And it's absolutely no big deal to the people who live here. They expect to hear that kind of variety on the radio. They actually listen to, support, and go out and pay money to see, guys like me. And they have an opportunity to find out about guys like me because...get this...we actually get played on those radio stations! What a concept!

The night I played in Albany, in a Borders Cafe, there were probably ten or fifteen people in the audience who knew of me because I get airplay on Northeast Public Radio, which is based there in town. The host of the big Saturday night folk show, Wanda Fischer (*mamafische@aol.com*), had me on as her guest last year, and again this year, and she plays my records regularly. Radio people up here in general are very astute and know what they like, so it's been a real treat to build up some goodwill with them. I did five radio shows in the South. In May, up here in the northeast, I have nine radio shows and one television show booked. Again---like, wow.

Last Saturday I played at the Vanilla Bean Cafe in Pomfret, Connecticut, a splendid little restaurant nestled in the countryside that has become one of the premiere venues for singer/songwriters in New England. I had been wanting to open for someone there for awhile now, to get my foot in the door, without success. Then last year I sent an e-mail to Maria Sangiolo (*msang@snet.net*), a well-known touring songwriter who is married to the Vanilla Bean's owner. Maria is touring only regionally these days, spending more of her time with her baby daughter. But she is also booking the club, and it helps to have someone who knows the ropes doing that. Short story---she gave me a thirty-minute opening slot, for no pay, opening for Bill Parsons.

If I can get more opening slots like that, I'll be doing just fine, thank you very much.

The crowd at the Vanilla Bean was incredible, and I must have done a good job, because I sold plenty of CDs, and Barry, the owner (Maria's husband) had some very nice things to say. As did the headliner, Bill Parsons, who was gracious enough to spend a good amount of time sharing stories and information with me before the show. I can't wait to play there again.

From that point to this point, things have been a blur---a very nice blur. Quickly put, here's what my schedule has been like:

Sunday 5/9---Borders in Wayne, NJ for a very quiet Mother's Day crowd.

Monday 5/10---Up to Vermont to tape "Songwriter's Notebook," a television program hosted by Rik Palieri (*rik@banjo.net*), a veteran touring musician who knows just about everybody in the folk community. He's had some heavy hitting guests recently, including Pete Seeger, whose episode he was editing when I showed up. His show focuses on different aspects of the songwriting experience...as you might guess, he had me on to discuss the joys, trials and tribulations of touring. And he played banjo on one of my songs! That was fun. Then he invited me up to his house in the hills above Hinesburg, Vermont, where he made me a meal, showed me a lifetime's worth of memorabilia collected from touring all over the world, and spent a good amount of time talking with me about being out on the road. What a wonderful man.

Wednesday 5/12 (morning)---An early morning radio interview with Ed McKeon (*EMcKeon@aol.com*) on WWUH-FM in Hartford, CT. I wish the operators of Southern California's public radio establishment would pay attention to this, because it goes against all conventional wisdom in the radio biz: WWUH has folk/acoustic music on six mornings a week, in drive time, and SIXTY PERCENT of its budget is funded by listeners to those shows. Is anybody listening? Not west of the Mississippi, they're not. Oops, I'm ranting.

Wednesday 5/12 (evening)---Back up to Hinesburg Vermont to play at the Good Times Cafe (contact Chris Applin at 802-482-4444), a tiny little pizza place that has a nice sound system and a regular Wednesday night music series. Another phenomenal experience. One couple came up to shake my hand---the woman told me she'd heard one of my songs on a local radio station, which also promoted my appearance at the cafe---and she had to come hear me. Can I say it one more time? Like, wow. I send out promotional material to every public and community radio station within 100 miles of every venue I play...this was the first time I heard of one of them actually doing something with it!

Thursday 5/13--A two hour (!!!) radio interview on "Connie's Corner" on WKNH-FM in Keene, New Hampshire. The show is hosted by Connie Bowblis (*frontporch@top.monad.net*), who booked me even though I didn't have a show in the area because (oh my!) she'd heard about me "through the grapevine" and wanted to meet me! Even with all the other good stuff happening this past couple of weeks, this bit of news was the nicest moment on the tour so far, to hear that people know who I am and are talking about me. And in a good way, to boot. Whew! After the interview, Connie and her husband Bob took me out to dinner at a Thai restaurant in town, where they knew the owner...I challenged him to make me something really hot, and he did, and he was so impressed that I actually liked it that I became sort of a mini-celebrity...next year he promised to make me something REALLY hot when I come back. I'm looking forward to it. Connie, Bob and I had a perfect couple of hours at the restaurant, talking about everything from politics to music to (naturally) hot food. It was just a great day.

Friday 5/14--A live radio interview with Ray Baumler (*rab@blms.com*) on WRUR in Rochester. Ray came to hear me play last year, and invited me on his show. A real folk fan, and a musician himself, Ray has become a big supporter of my music in the area. As I drove out of town listening to his show, he played my song "Michael" in a set with "Michael" by Joan Baez, followed by "Michael Row Your Boat Ashore" by the Weavers. Quite an honor to be in that company. I drove straight to Syracuse where I played at the Borders store (my fifth appearance there). They set up a nice stage in the cafe, and the audience was, again, incredibly responsive and attentive. This is a good Borders to play at--contact Rebecca Kootchick at (315) 466-0314.

I drove straight back to Rochester after the show, so I could sleep in this morning and have my day off.

Tonight I play at the Borders here in Rochester, which is far and away my favorite of all the 100-or-so Borders I've played at. They pay well, they treat you well, and they have a regular folk audience that comes to hear music on the weekends. Contact at this store is Rich Marcy at (716) 292-6511.

Overall, I'm really happy and excited and glad I'm out here, despite all the hard parts. There are many more weeks ahead of me on this trip, and there will no doubt be many more bumps in the road, but periods such as this remind me that the work does pay off, and the only things that can stop the forward progress are my own doubts and fears--and I guess I'm really nuts, because I have fewer of those as I proceed.

All the bothers are just that--bothers.

Speaking of which, there really are only two major bothers for me:

1. Money (which I'll discuss next time);
2. Ffff..fff...food.

Yes, we've spoken of this before, so I won't go into the whole emotional aspect of it again. Instead, I'll just detail some of the difficulties that touring brings my way in this area, from a practical point of view.

I've noticed that my gut is a little bit bigger than when I left, mostly because in the last two weeks I've done so much driving that there hasn't been enough time to make fresh salads, which I try to have for dinner at least four nights a week...this past week in particular has been a nasty one, though, and I've succumbed to the worst temptations faced by Fat Guys like me when on the road.

What will happen now (since I can't afford to buy new clothes, thank God) is that I'll be very, very conscious about everything I eat again until the next big batch of driving days. I'll get back down to where I was when I left L.A., then gain five or ten pounds on Road Food, then lose it again. It's usually just mildly annoying to have to be so careful, but sometimes it's downright HARD. I suppose it's good for my character. The one thing I've done on this trip is stay away from all sweets (overnight drives excepted, and there's only been one of those), and that's been difficult enough--can you imagine staying in Vermont and not even taking a *bite* of Ben & Jerry's?

Okay, so then here are Mark's Top Eight Evil Road Food Temptations:

8. McDonald's. Okay, this is an obvious one, but honest to goodness, I really do avoid it as much as possible. The problem with McDonald's is twofold--first, they've always got some sort of special going (two Quarter Pounders w/Cheese for \$2, etc.), which makes it affordable, and second, with the exception of the Big Mac, all their food is "driver friendly," meaning you can hold the food in one hand, drive with the other, and nothing spills on you. Of course half an hour after eating this stuff there's a big ball of ick in the middle of your intestines that makes you wish you'd never touched that damned Fillet O' Fish in the first place, but there you go.

7. Burger King. Another obvious one, mostly due to the 99-cent Whopper, which appears suddenly and without warning right when I'm most vulnerable.

6. Dunkin Donuts. Right now I'm in the belly of the beast. Dunkin Donuts stores are--and I'm not exaggerating--as prevalent in New England as 7-Eleven stores are in Southern California. People use them for landmarks here. ("Go to the first traffic light, then turn left at the third Dunkin Donuts".) The donuts are pretty good, but because everyone goes there, all the time, they're always fresh. It's about the only place to get coffee in New England (the folks up here think that Starbucks is for west coast sissies), so I have to keep my nose plugged to avoid smelling the donuts when I go in to buy my morning cup.

5. Anything by Hostess. They are in racks right by the door as you enter the gasoline mini-mart to use the rest room. They are small. Compact. They cry out to you--"we're so easy to buy! Buy us! Eat us!" Run as fast as you can.

4. Steak 'N' Shake. These high-end fast food places are located in the Midwest and South. No steaks, just "Steakburgers," which are pretty normal-tasting, burgers. But it's not the burgers that makes Steak 'N' Shake so tempting...it's the shakes. I would never have believed a chain of restaurants could make actual shakes and malts that taste like they were made at a local fountain. But these things are soooooo good, they will take your breath away. I have not had even *one* of these shakes on this trip, and that is the strongest example of my willpower I can give you.

3. Waffle House. Regional in the midwest, south, and parts of the northeast. Tiny, ugly yellow buildings with a counter and a few (very few) booths, at which you are not allowed to sit if you're by yourself. This is no-nonsense, Southern-style, high cholesterol cooking, where you can get a traditional short order meal that's totally tasty and incredibly cheap. There is zero (minus zero, usually) atmosphere, and you're almost always going to be sitting next to some guy you'd swear is wanted for molesting something other than humans, but damn if the food isn't good. You can hear your arteries scream as you order your meal. But the waitress will just about always call you "hon" or "darlin'" and the other customers will protect you from the guy next to you. So far I've only broken down once on this trip.

2. Denny's. I'm sorry, but I make no apologies for this one. America would not be America without Denny's. They are almost always there for you whenever you need them, and their breakfasts (which is the only food there that's really good) are, in a word, heavenly, especially when you've been driving all night and you need something real in your mouth. The coffee is good, and the breakfast menu features some of the best value around. Yes, it's terrible health-wise, but if you're going to travel, you're going to eat at Denny's at least once a week. No really, you are. My current fave is the Meat Lover's Skillet, which at around \$5.50 is a bargain, loaded with enough stuff to fill even a guy like me (and that's saying something, sister).

And the most evil, horrible, mouth-watering temptation on the Open Road:

1. Krispy Kreme Doughnuts. Regional in the South. Yes, they spell it "Doughnuts." Now listen, you want to know this. These are the heroin of cake-like foods. If you don't want to get addicted, don't even have ONE. Like drug pushers, the fine folks at Krispy Kreme make sure that the first one is always free...really...they'll give you one to try if you ask, at no charge. That's how much faith they have in the addictive power of their product. Everything from the plain to the cinnamon crumb to the jelly-filled have a robust, creamy-like texture that almost melts in your mouth. Krispy Kreme stores are actually donut factories, with a conveyor belt of goodies constantly moving from the kitchen to the front counter. And each store provides fresh, packaged donuts to local stores, so if you see Krispy Kreme donuts in a convenience store, you always know they're made locally. I got out of the South this year with only one break-down...I can't believe I was so successful...

Okay, I'm glad I got that out of my system. The salad makings are in the cooler for tonight, and my high-fiber cereal was on the menu for breakfast, so I'm safe for another day.

I next head for Rhode Island, then Long Island, then a week in Boston where I'll be staying with relatives for a week...free lodging...like, wow.

THIRTEEN
Loaves, Fishes and Buckage

Tuesday
June 1, 1999
Allentown, Pennsylvania
11:52 p.m. EDT
Tripometer: 18,662 miles

***** *****

Summer hit New York City today, and I was in the middle of Greenwich Village to see it. After spending the early morning going over a lengthy set of letters on one of the lawsuits I monitor for my day job, I looked out the window, saw the sunshine, saw it was still morning, saw Interstate 78 on the horizon. Since I-78 essentially ends at the Holland Tunnel, I figured what the hell, so I drove the hour or so to New York, dug the Village for three hours or so, checked my voice mail about three times for messages from work, had lunch, then headed back here to Allentown, where more day job work awaited...it was about four p.m. here and only one p.m. back home, so basically the whole day still awaited, work-wise.

I thank God every day for the day job I have as a paralegal. Without it, pursuing my musical career with this degree of fervor would be extremely difficult if not impossible. When I first started touring I barely made any money on the road; today I make enough from music alone that I could probably live on the road--but I wouldn't be able to have a place to live back in L.A. and (most importantly) I wouldn't be able to continue to pay down the enormous debt I've accrued in releasing and promoting my music over the past few years. In another couple of years (maybe less, maybe a little more), I can already tell that I will become totally self-sufficient on the road, but until then I gratefully accept the necessity to be constantly "on the job" for my employers back in Southern California...and I will be eternally grateful to them--I will always work for them as long as they need me.

What this means, though, is that I am always on the phone. Picture me at the corner of Thompson and Bleecker Streets in the heart of the Village, at a pay phone, girding for a battle with an insurance adjuster over whether or not he'll defend a lawsuit I've sent to him. Last fall I attended a major meeting on insurance coverage from a phone booth at a truck stop in the middle of Nebraska. I can't count the number of times I've been on the phone from some poorly air-conditioned motel room, heavy into a conference call with defense counsel and my boss back in Santa Monica, discussing trial strategy or settlement values or whatnot, or going over indemnity language in a lease with one of the property managers for the various shopping centers my office represents.

And then, of course, there are the letters and the legal documents and pleading drafts, all usually worked on late at night after the day's performances. The miracle of the technology that brings these messages to you also makes it possible for me to juggle the two working worlds I often simultaneously inhabit.

And yes, sometimes it's weird. But the bills--somehow--get paid.

And so I'm not only happy and grateful, I'm fairly certain that Somebody or Something up there is looking out for me. There is nothing quite like the loneliness of the road, combined with the white-hot terror stemming from the realization that all the bills ain't gonna get paid this month, to give just about anyone some form of religion. Speaking for myself, I forged a working relationship with God (and that's what I'll call Whatever It Is here, simply for convenience) some time before I hit the road, and that relationship has grown quite a bit with each new leap of faith I've taken.

When it comes to finances, faith is sometimes all I have.

I pay for most of my road expenses, including gasoline, motel bills, some food and the rental car, with my American Express card. This enables me to have a permanent record somewhere of all these expenses in case I lose my receipts, and lets me travel without the need to carry traveler's cheques. What this means, though, is that in the middle of every month I have a huge American Express bill to pay, which takes all of the money I've made on the road since the first of the month *and* the entire paycheck from the day job. I make sure to get this bill paid, in full and on time, no matter what. Without the Amex card, just about everything gets *really* difficult. And usually I *just* barely scrape up enough to pay the balance.

At the end of the month I take whatever road money I've made since the middle of the month, along with the month-end day job paycheck, and pay all my other expenses, which includes the rent back home, all the utility bills and four or five nagging revolving charge accounts that never die. When I run out of cash, it's these revolving accounts that don't get paid, and as anyone who's failed to pay such bills knows, the nasty phone calls start coming in on the voice mail back home until they're brought up to date.

So...as you might recall, right at the beginning of this trip I lost a big-guaranteed gig in Gulfport, Mississippi. The loss of that one guarantee threw my entire financial world into an uproar, since I was going to use that money to pay the IRS what I owed it for my 1998 taxes. When I lost the gig, I made the intelligent choice---don't piss off the IRS. So I paid the Feds what I owed before April 15, but was left hanging on all (and I mean ALL) of those revolving charge accounts. As the next couple of pay periods came and went, interest was added until the minimum payments on all of these accounts were...uh...large. Big. Huge.

I sat down a week-and-a-half ago and tried to figure out how and when I would get caught up with these bills, and could not see a way to do so.

So I did what I have come to do quite often, especially on the road...I prayed.

Don't get me wrong about this. I'm not someone who believes in trying to get the rest of the world to find the spiritual answers I've found...these things are purely personal. I tell you my own experience here simply as that---my own experience. And my own experience is that prayer is a powerful thing. And powerful because of the understanding I have in the faith behind it.

The faith I speak of is based upon the most fundamental of foundations: the acceptance that what I believe cannot be proven and may, indeed, be false. It is a faith that comes from an understanding of what goes on *inside* of me as much as what goes on externally. It is almost totally beyond words or any kind of description other than my actions, which are the only real physical manifestation of my faith.

Sorry if that sounded complicated or highfalutin. It's not.

Somewhere along the line I decided that the worst thing that could happen if I took a leap of faith is that I'd die. That sounds pretty dramatic, but really, I don't think it is, not if dying is accepted as a natural consequence of living. Sure, the first few leaps were more frightening than the most recent ones, but each time, instead of doing the Wyle E. Coyote thing (I always picture that little puff of dust at the bottom of the cliff when I leap), a branch or an awning or a big fluffy mattress that I hadn't seen before somehow stops the fall, and new rewards (or at the very least solutions to old problems) appear.

And prayer---whether it really is a direct link to God (which I happen to believe it is) or just a way of psychologically reassuring myself that I can control my destiny by way of a surrogate---is my way of preparing to take these leaps of faith.

So on that day when I figured there was no way to get back on track with my finances, I prayed for guidance, for a clear mind, in order that I might be able to see my way clear to a solution.

The next day it hit me---an obvious solution was to give up my home and find different accommodations back in L.A.

One of the first big leaps of faith I made was in 1994, when I decided to move to Sierra Madre, where I found the cottage I now call home. It is an ideal place to live, with great neighbors, nature all around, safe streets, a diverse community (both ethnically and economically) and above all a genuine sense of *place*. Moving to that cottage has been the single most important decision I've made in the last five years.

And now, suddenly, an even more important decision had become obvious. It was time to move on again, to accept that, indeed, I have achieved one of the goals I'd set for myself when I moved into that cottage in 1994---I am, in fact, a touring artist. And it is now more important to conserve the money I spend for rent on the cottage (and no, it's not possible to sublet the place for a number of reasons too tedious to set forth here) than it is to keep it.

So I contacted some friends back in Sierra Madre, and they are now looking for alternative living spaces for me, there in town, where I truly hope I can stay. I'm hoping I can find a room mate to share a two-bedroom apartment with. I'd be a damn fine room mate, too, seeing as how I own a stove/oven, a refrigerator and a dishwasher, all of which I'd bring with me, AND I'd be out of town almost all of the time. So anyone out there who knows anyone looking for a room mate situation, you know where to find me.

And hey presto.

Here's the thing about prayer and leaps of faith and all that stuff...

Two days after I made the decision to give up the cottage, I sat down with my bills again, this time in a different frame of mind. And waddaya know. Right there in front of me, with those same exact bills in front of me that had absolutely been untenable just days before, the numbers added up...I figured that by the end of the following week all of the bills would be caught up. And they were. It was like the story of the loaves and the fishes in the Bible...suddenly there was enough for everyone.

Okay, okay, yes, I'm aware that logically the solution was always there. But not in the world that existed *inside* of me before I prayed. At the very least, the prayer cleared my mind so that I could find a different way of thinking....and at most, there really was a miracle. I don't need anyone else to know that...because here, right here, I know.

Amen. Now let's refer to the hymnal. No collection plate this week.

May was simply an unbelievably satisfying month, both in terms of how the shows went and in terms of exposure...and yes, buckage too.

On Sunday the 16th I played an afternoon show at the Borders store in Farmington, Connecticut, which is a suburb of Hartford (contact Beatrice Birdman at 860-674-5243). They set up a nice little audience section outside the Music Department where, as has become the rule rather than the exception, no one showed up for the first set and lots of people showed up for the second, listening well and buying CDs.

That evening I visited with Amy Jeffries (amykins-folk@hotmail.com), who hosts two folk music shows, the main one being "Not Yet Named" on WRTC in Hartford. Amy is, I believe, 20 or 21 years old, but programs one of the most emotionally satisfying folk shows I've ever heard, a very spiritual and intelligent mix of melodic folk music I'd find impressive if programmed by someone three times her age. The woman has a lot of soul, and though she's fairly shy and unassuming in person, her song selection tells you all you need to know about her. We had a very nice interview, as we did last year.

The next day I drove down to Ewing, New Jersey to visit "Legacy," a radio program on WTSR-FM hosted by Pete Kernast and John Bates. Pete had broken his leg the day I visited, so John was holding down the fort. John (artistrep2@aol.com) is an interesting guy, a teacher at an exclusive private high school who knows more about popular music than most anyone you're likely to meet. John also hosts a local folk music series and house concerts. We discovered during the interview that we both spent our adolescent years with AM radio earphones stuck in our ears just about 24 hours a day, John listening to "Cousin Brucie" on WABC in New York and me listening to Robert W. Morgan and the other "Boss Jocks" on KHJ in Los Angeles.

I then moved on to Cranston, Rhode Island (Providence area) where I played two fairly uneventful Borders shows, in Cranston and in North Attleboro, MA. It was here that I had my revelation about finances, and when I left for Long Island on May 20, I felt like a ton of bricks had been lifted from my shoulders.

I set up shop at the Econo Lodge in Smithtown, Long Island, for four days, five shows and one radio interview on the Island, all of which went extremely well.

Leigh Macario (phone 516-683-8709) was the very first Borders Community Relations Coordinator I ever called, back in May of 1995, when I began booking my first tour. Leigh not only booked me to play at her store, she introduced me to Walt Graham, who hosts the single most popular folk show on the Island, "AcousticConnections," on WSHU-FM out of Fairfield, Connecticut every Saturday night. Through Leigh, I met Walt, who became a big fan of my music and who, by playing my records on his program, has built an audience for me all over Long Island.

There are six Borders stores on Long Island...on this trip I played at five of them. Quickly, they were:

5/20 Westbury (CRC Leigh Macario, phone above)

5/21 Stony Brook (CRC Christian Berntsen, phone 516-979-0500)

5/22 Commack (CRC Amy Krinner, phone 516-462-0569)

5/23 (Afternoon) Levittown (CRC Judy D'Ambrosio, phone 516-579-2474)

5/23 (Evening) Bohemia (CRC Otto Schultz, phone 516-244-0436)

I started the morning of 5/23 doing a radio interview with Charlie Backfish on WUSB-FM out of Stony Brook. Charlie (*CBackfish@aol.com*) also has a huge listening audience, and between his listeners and Walt's listeners, I had a remarkably successful set of shows. That Sunday, 5/23, was extremely busy, but at the end of the day I had a nice roll of money in my pocket and a glow of satisfaction from all the compliments I received following my shows. I guess I must be getting good at this...now *that's* gratifying.

On Monday, on my way up to Boston, I dropped by to see Walt Graham at his home, to have coffee and just generally thank him for all his support over the years. Walt (*graham@wshu.org*), who makes his living as an audio engineer, lives in a beautiful house in Connecticut with a state-of-the-art studio in his basement...made me salivate with envy.

I then spent all of last week with my aunt and her husband in the Boston suburb of Boston. Staying with family is always a challenge for me, but these people are truly wonderful. Their house was full with not only me, but their daughter Dhira, who was home from college for the summer, as well as my own youngest brother John and his girlfriend, Beth. Add to that the usual collection of people moving in and out of their house (busy, loud households seem to run in my family), and it made for a hectic setting. But not having to pay for motel rooms for a week saved me in the neighborhood of \$400 or so, so I'm not complaining. Plus my aunt and her family are incredible, lovely people.

I did two radio shows during the week. The first was on Tuesday with Richard Fox (*foxy@foxy.net*), who hosts the Tuesday edition of "CrossTracks" on WCUW in Worcester. Richard plays a very eclectic mix of music from all genres, especially jazz, rock and folk. He also features a lot of spoken word recordings on his program. We spent the better part of 90 minutes chatting it up, and I even got to sing an Andrew Lorand song on the air! Richard then posted a really nice note about me on the folkdj-l e-mail listserve, which was a sweet surprise from a very nice man.

On Thursday at noon I appeared for the third year in a row on WUMB-FM, which is arguably the most influential folk music station in the country. WUMB plays folk music 12 hours a day...and you can hear *everything* in the world of folk on the station. The station's music director, Marilyn Rea Beyer (beyer@umb.edu), who first started playing my records on the station in 1997, hosts the mid-day program, and had me as her guest. It was a really cool experience, as it always is at WUMB, sitting in that big, modern studio and singing my songs. It's moments like that when I almost have to pinch myself to make sure I'm really there.

All of my shows last week were west of Boston. On Thursday I played at Fire & Water in Northampton (contact Star Drucker at 413-586-8336), a Vegan Coffeehouse with a great vibe. They book three sets a night there, and you never know who you're going to be playing for. My audience consisted of a middle-aged couple, a very young kid at the coffee bar, a guy with a bowl of soup reading the New York Times while I sang and applauding loudly after every song, and (my biggest fans that night) a lesbian couple right up front who listened to every syllable as if I were reciting the Answer to Life's Questions. Nice people. Very little money. But a good place to be heard, especially if you want to get an opening slot at the Iron Horse, which is Northampton's big venue. I'll definitely be back next year.

On Friday I played a new Borders in Shrewsbury (contact Nevert Asadoorian at 508-845-8720), where I really thought no one was listening...but they were---in the book shop. The cafe was almost totally empty while I played, but after I was done I sold six or seven CDs---almost all from people who were listening in the book store...another lesson learned, I guess...

On Saturday I played a very cool coffee house in Worcester called Java Hut (contact Roberta Surro at 508-752-1678). Java Hut is loud and raucous and filled with college kids. I had to win them over, but by the second set I was talking to people from the stage and cutting special deals on my CDs...afterward a lot of the kids (gee look at me, I'm calling people "kids" now...sheesh) with dreams of touring themselves grilled me about how to get out on the road. I felt like The Old Sage. Well...old anyway.

Sunday was a very dead day at the Borders in Framingham...a beautiful Sunday on a three-day weekend, but the family who I'd been staying with dragged some friends to come and see me, and they all bought CDs, so it was sort of cheating...but hey a good gig is a good gig. Usually the Framingham store is a very nice place to play---this was my fourth appearance there (contact Louise Motherpearl at 508-875-2321).

Yesterday I pulled into Allentown, and went directly to the studios of WDIY (the "DIY" stands for "Do It Yourself"), a station formed about four years ago by local community radio people dissatisfied with the scattershot way the local colleges ran their stations. So they formed a board, petitioned for a license, and now WDIY is the major NPR/Music station in this part of the Lehigh Valley. I visited Otto Bost (FolkDude@aol.com), whose program, "Acoustic Eclectic," is heard every Monday night. When we were done Otto, like Richard Fox, posted a very complimentary note on the folkdj-l list. A great way to end the month.

I can tell that tonight is going to be a good night for sleep. It just feels right. It's really quiet here in Allentown, and the air conditioning in this room is just right to keep one sleepy and cozy under the blankets, even though it's hot and humid outside. Plus, the walls here seem to be thick enough that I can't hear what's going on next door.

When I stayed at the Econo Lodge in Smithtown, the room adjacent to the headboard of my bed was occupied the entire time by a couple with a pet dog, the breed of which I can't be sure because I never saw the animal. But it was a small dog. I could tell by the sound of its yap. Not a bark, a yap. And it yapped day and night, whenever its owners were away. Sort of sounded like a toy jackhammer going off after awhile.

On the Friday night, at about midnight, a couple entered the room on the other side of mine. They were there solely to have sex. And the female end of the partnership was...shall we say, expressive. She screamed, actually. She screamed like a banshee. She screamed orders to her companion, in graphic detail. He apparently complied with her demands, because she began to scream even louder.

If you stay in enough motel rooms, you're bound to hear couples making love from time to time, and sometimes loudly...when you're alone in the next room, sometimes it can make you lonely or horny or both...but this...this was so ridiculous that all I could do was laugh...the only reason they didn't hear me laugh, I'm sure, was because of the volume of the woman's bellowing for faster and deeper and...er...more creative...activity from her partner.

Oh, and of course while all this was going on, on the other side of the room, behind that wall the sound of a little dog yapyapyapping could be heard, almost as loudly as the woman behind the other wall. If I stood right in the middle of my room the stereo effect sort of made me feel like I was living in a Fellini film.

Speaking of yapping, I have done more than enough of that for one message. This month I have only 15 live shows and one radio show scheduled, but lots of other things to do, including typing some corporate resolutions for my day job. I might even work on a new song or two. Who knows?

FOURTEEN
Les Critiques

Monday
June 21, 1999
Bloomington, Indiana
7:25 a.m. EST (CDT)
Tripometer: 23,985 miles

Well, I'm now on Car Number Three.

The Big Green Buick started flashing the "Low Tire Pressure" dummy light when I was passing through upstate New York on my way to Cleveland a couple of weeks ago. The tires were fine. So I drove to the Elmira office of the rental car company I rent from and got another car...

...this one's an Oldsmobile Intrigue...and I like it even better than the Buick...same amount of room, but a little sleeker and with WAY more pickup (important for passing 18-wheelers on narrow 2-lane U.S. highways).

I'm up to almost 24,000 miles so far on this trip. Gee, do you think I made the correct decision in renting a car?

Uh, yes. And thank you very much.

Indiana is a strange place. Not that I don't like that fact; it's just always felt a little off-kilter.

Take the time zone thing, for instance. You've probably noticed that whenever the clocks change from/to Daylight Time, the national news always says that the change will occur in all 50 states except Hawaii, Arizona and "parts of Indiana."

Why it doesn't happen in the entire state of Indiana is a mystery to me, but what it boils down to is this: The eastern part of the state is in the Eastern time zone, and the western part is in the Central time zone, splitting the state in a weird way to begin with. But then, when spring comes and the western part of the state shifts to Central Daylight Time, the Eastern part of the state remains at Eastern Standard Time, bringing the actual time on clocks, state-wide, into sync...

...except that everything in the eastern part of the state is still conducted on standard time. So network television shows that start at 8:00 Eastern, 7:00 Central, begin at 8:00, just like always, even though in the *actual* Eastern time it's 9:00...in Western Indiana that show will start at 7:00...but if you want to watch a cable program (all of which are on satellite and adjusted to daylight time), you have to remember it's on at the Central Time hour...it's like a little island of time-warp.

Then there's the whole Hoosier thing. I've been here many times, but still no local resident has been able to explain to me what a Hoosier is, other than an Indiana native. So okay fine. But where did the name come from? No one seems to know. I am troubled.

Since my last missive I have begun the process of selling off 18 years' worth (that's how long I've lived by myself) of belongings to get ready to trim down from a house to a room. My friend Leslie, who lives in Sierra Madre, worked like mad and found a place for me to live...she actually spent an hour talking to my future room-mate, got a good feel for the place, and I used her description of it (and a lengthy telephone discussion with the new room-mate) to make the decision...

...so I gave my landlord notice, and as of August 8 I will be living in the master bedroom of a townhouse in Sierra Madre, paying almost half in rent what I'm paying now. I will have exactly one week from the time I return from this tour to the time I move in to the new place. I think that may be a hectic week.

I've sold off (from thousands of miles away, with the assistance of my neighbors---who are saints, saints I tell you!) my refrigerator, my home entertainment system and my entire recording studio...still have to sell the stove, the living room furniture and the various kitchen appliances...I'll be putting an ad in the Recycler today or tomorrow.

It's all so strange conducting this major lifestyle change while being so far away. But several really important truths have come forward as a result, most important of which are that I have some incredible friends back home...and that I really am apart from my home...away---and not just physically. I'm now living simultaneously in two places..."home," whatever that may mean anymore, and this wide-open landscape where everything is in a constant state of...what? I guess I'd call it redundant flux...how's that for a clever turn of the phrase this early in the morning?

Here are some of the places I've played since the beginning of June:

On Wednesday June 2 I did a show at John & Peter's Place in a lovely tourist town called New Hope Pennsylvania (contact Jennifer Wohl at 215-862-5981), which at one time was a big venue for folk artists. On the wall in the performing area are posters from past shows with some big names...all of which are ten years old or more. Nowadays they feature music on most nights, but mostly bands. The bartender told me that they are getting ready to make another push to get bigger names back in the room...but on the night I played no one on Planet Earth seemed to know it was there, and I played a set to a completely empty room (and I mean completely, since the bar is in a separate area), until a couple of young women came in to use the restroom, stayed for a couple of songs...and bought a CD. So the night wasn't a total loss. I left early, though, since there was no guarantee and not much point in staying. The room itself is a very cool place...I sure hope they get it up and running as a major venue again soon.

Next I played a very good show (my fourth appearance there) at the Borders store in Princeton, NJ (contact Ken Paris at 609-514-1478 or kparis@bordersstores.com by e-mail). Several listeners of the local radio show I'd done a couple of weeks prior showed up, and a good time was had by all.

The Borders in Bangor Maine (contact Andrea Stark at astark@bordersstores.com or 207-990-3668) is always a good place to play. An extremely attentive audience, but no one seems to ever buy CDs there. That's okay, as the guarantee is fair and Maine is lovely in the spring.

The best venue discovery so far this month---and a truly terrific discovery it is--- is the Arabica University Circle Coffeehouse in Cleveland (contact Chuck Diamond at his home at 216-421-1775; store number is 216-791-0300).

Located right next door to the Barking Spider Tavern (which also hosts folk events and at which I will be playing in a couple of weeks), the Arabica is contained within a beautifully-restored old house in the center of Cleveland's University Circle, a tree-lined haven of academia that most people outside of Cleveland don't even know about. Chuck himself is a very interesting person, and will talk your ear off about all he's done and who he's met over the years...but it's worth the time. He booked me on a Thursday night, a warm and lovely late spring evening, and had me play on the front steps, facing out onto the cafe tables along the street. Because rain had been predicted earlier in the day the crowd was small.

But---now try to imagine an L.A. club manager doing this---despite a crippling disease that makes it difficult for him to walk, Chuck grabbed a bunch of my CDs and personally went to each table while I was playing, shaking hands with the customers and urging them to buy my albums. By the end of the night I had made more money than I make during an average weekend show---and because of Chuck's encouragement, the audience listened and I made some new fans...and all of this with a very very small audience for the size of the place. I'm definitely going back.

On to Pittsburgh for another amazing audience at a Borders store. This one, located in the Northway Mall (contact Robert Peluso at rpeluso@bordersstores.com or 412-635-7854) has a stage in the cafe and a regular Friday night show, which draws a regular audience. It's only an hour set, and the guarantee is small, but I've always done well there CD sale-wise, and it's always good for the soul to have a large audience sitting and listening in a cafe setting like this.

The following night I opened for The Kennedys at a place called Andy's in Chestertown, Maryland (contact Andy---Andy is a woman---at 410-778-6779). The most important gig, career-wise, that I've done so far. With the exception of the big festivals, this type of place is as big-time as it gets in the folk world, and I knew it. An extraordinarily comfortable, welcoming room with big high-back comfy chairs for the audience and a huge fireplace for the winter months, this is the quintessential folk venue. I had a half-hour set to open the show...the place was packed for the Kennedys, who couldn't have been more gracious. Pete Kennedy did a very nice introduction for me---and since he'd never heard me before it was a very generous gesture---and as a result the audience welcomed me warmly and responded in the same way---they asked for an encore and bought my CDs and overall it was a marvelous night. Afterward I stayed and watched Pete & Maura do their magic---quite a show. Quite a night. I hope there'll be more of them like this.

On Wednesday this past week I made a stop to visit Mike Kelsey (kelsey@bluemarble.net) at WFHB-FM here in Bloomington, to promote the show I did yesterday at Borders. WFHB is run by a foundation out of the old fire house in town, and it features about the most eclectic schedule I've ever heard. Mike's show, "These Friends of Mine," is on the air on Wednesday mornings from 6 to 9 a.m. He is a very low-key, hilariously funny man who makes one feel right at home. I visited Mike last year, and hope to do it every year I come through. You can listen to WFHB online by visiting their site at www.wfbb.org.

Then I started some crazy driving...

I took two days to get back to Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania to play at the Rainforest Cafe (see my post from the autumn tour about this place). Robert Sanchez, the owner, is just a sweet man, and even though, like last time I was through, it was raining and there wasn't much of an audience, he welcomed me and invited me back...we're certain that *eventually* I'll come through on a good night!

The next day I drove up to Malone, New York, the seat of Franklin County, 74 miles south of Montreal, about as far north as you can get in the U.S. Malone is a farming community with a lot of history (as all the towns in that part of the world do). I first learned of Malone in 1995 when looking for places to play on my spring tour. A radio station in Plattsburg, NY referred me to someone, who referred me to a woman who booked a local coffeehouse in the basement of the Episcopal church in town. I played there in 1996 and 1997 to marvelous audiences (filled with people not only from town but from surrounding communities and even Quebec). In 1998 the series ended, but the woman who ran it referred me to Gladys Chetney (518-483-5863), a member of the Malone Chamber of Commerce's Arts Committee...long story short: I got booked to play the first show in the summertime series at Arsenal Green Park. What fun! The Council does a great job of advertising, so despite an unseasonably cool evening, lots of people gathered at the gazebo in the park and we had a great time. A very fair guarantee, and an appreciative audience.

Then I got into my car and drove 850 miles overnight.

For some reason (or reasons) this was a difficult drive...got my first speeding ticket (near Antwerp, NY) in over three years...three separate sleep bombs that I heeded immediately, staying safe and stopping often. But when I got to my destination (in the midwest) I was in a strange frame of mind.

I slept like a rock for a couple of hours, but was still pretty much "out of it" when I went to play at the local venue, which is another of those big-time folk places. They book one major show a week, and on the other weekend day they do an open stage for local performers with a featured act, who also hosts the open stage and gets a small guarantee. That was me. I was booked so they could get a look at me for possible consideration as an opening act for one of their big shows later on.

It went very well, I thought. Not a lot of open stage performers, but it was a warm and fun experience, and my songs were received enthusiastically.

The owner, a very nice, outgoing person---who usually isn't there for the open stage but was on-hand that night because the usual manager was out ill---talked a long time with me before I began playing, and we shared some war stories...this place has had a who's-who of performers come through (their pictures surround the performance room) and he had a lot of great stories to share with me.

When I began playing I noticed he listened to my first song, then in the middle of the second song he got up and went upstairs. He heard only one bit of the very last song I sang at the end of the evening. It didn't really register with me in any way...I figured he had a business to run and that's what he was doing.

...and then as I was getting ready to go, as he was paying me, he hit me with IT.

A traveling artist's bad dream---especially a sleep-deprived, exhausted artist:
He gave me an unsolicited critique.

You're a great writer, he said. You're a very good player, he said. But you don't have that certain intangible that great performers have, he said. All in a very friendly, easygoing way. He made sure to say he hoped I'd take it the "right way."

I listened and did not even flinch. I smiled and told him that, hey, I'd accept what he said in the spirit it was given, and that I'd just keep playing...that when he saw me next time I'd be that much better of a performer. He seemed relieved that I didn't get angry, and by the time I left told me he'd consider me as an opening act...which is what I wanted in the first place.

I just wish I had been more rested...because his comments bothered me---a lot--for a couple of days.

Here's the thing about criticism and doing this:
It *must* be ignored, or you won't get anywhere.
And I mean, IGNORED.

Remembering all along that the goal is to be successful (and you can define that any way you personally define it), listening to other people's criticisms is pointless.

Now this is important---there is a distinction between *constructive advice* and *criticism*, and it is a distinction as important as the one between taking a short cut and driving off a cliff---one will get you somewhere faster, the other will kill you.

The easiest criticisms to ignore are criticisms from the press. I remember reading, for the first time, a review of one of my albums in a major publication, and marveling at how wrong the writer got things. But then I remembered that critics in the press are *writers* first, and usually, even in rave reviews, facts will never get in the way of a well-turned phrase. So criticism by professional writers is very simple to ignore---take whatever good they have to say and chuck the rest.

Criticism on a personal level is an entirely different animal, and it kills promising careers on a daily basis.

The thing to always remember about criticism is that it is always---ALWAYS---about the person making it, and has NOTHING TO DO with you. This is especially true with writers, but it also applies to the kind of criticisms you get from the more common areas of life, such as from friends...or club owners.

Think about it---look at anyone who has been successful at anything, and you will see someone who has found something he/she loves to do, and is doing it---period. Doing it, because it is what he/she is supposed to be doing, because it makes him/her happy and satisfied, and because that satisfaction has created desire...and the desire has created a goal.

Anyone with such a goal, with such a drive to succeed, must have, by definition, put aside all the "reasonable" or "logical" or "helpful" criticism of others in order to move forward. If you're going to do this, or any endeavor that you believe in, you must have the ability to be perceived as a lunatic by others in order to be able to see your goal and ignore all other roadblocks.

And the roadblock of criticism is the most insidious, because it almost always comes in the form of concern or rationality, and often from people whose intentions are to "help" you. But be aware---how on earth does it help you to heed criticism? All it does is tell you to stop. Even if it's to "re-think" or "re-tool," it is a brake. And, believe me, if you keep braking you're going to wind up at the end of your life having traveled just a few feet. To get anywhere important, you must first know yourself, know what it is you want, and then proceed. Go. No braking.

All the while, of course, the people giving you the criticism have done nothing to actually help you...all they have done is whisper doubt in your ear. And in pursuit of bliss, doubt is death.

...and oh by the way, you may also notice that the people giving you the criticism are usually in one of two positions: 1) A position of *perceived* power (such as a venue owner) who (usually unconsciously) uses that perception to sit "above it all" and throw out criticisms willy-nilly without regard for how it affects the recipient, or 2) A position of envy (again, usually unconscious). This is the most common, coming from friends, family and colleagues who haven't pursued their own dreams and who almost instinctively hand out "advice" which is not advice at all, and which almost always is just code for "stop. Go no further. I can't bear to see you become successful."

Constructive advice, the kind of advice that actually leads somewhere, comes from those who are already on their own path, who are going through, or have gone through, the same struggles in the pursuit of their goals that you are going through. Advice from a fellow adventurer is gold---and it's rare, because those who *do* know what it's like to pursue a dream against all odds usually know it's pointless to offer anything but support.

I have developed a rule of thumb on this---and for what it's worth, here it is...

Advice worth listening to comes from someone who is unquestioning in his/her total acceptance of the *basic nature* of your goals and dreams. So-called "advice" from anyone else is to be ignored.

That's it.

As long as you're confident---about your talent, about your place in the world, about what is possible and what is fantasy---then you can become *realistic* about those things as well, and criticism will become pointless. And you can simply go--there is no reason *not* to go, and make your mistakes, get yourself bruised now and then...and learn---*on your own terms*---because that's the only way you'll really develop.

And the bottom line---as it is with all of this---is that you're going to die sometime, almost assuredly sooner than you plan. So why let the words of others stand in your way, no matter how "logical" or "reasonable" they sound? Do you love what you do? If so, nothing else will matter. Again: Go.

...and when you're tired, sleepy, not feeling particularly healthy...it is easy to let an unexpected bit of criticism creep in and muddle your brain...which the criticism from that midwestern club owner did the other day...

...but I guess I really am permanently affixed to my dreams now, and ridiculously confident, because after a good night's sleep (and a few colorful prayers---hopefully God doesn't mind an expletive or two now and then) it all came back---why I'm here, who I am, and the joy of living on my own terms.

See, after all is said and done, you have to do this because you love it, not for any other reason. It sounds so simple to write it down, but in practice it's a hard lesson to learn, a big plate glass window you have to walk through to fully understand...and you'll get cut up a little---maybe a lot---on the way.

I'm on the other side of that window now; I've been bloodied and have more than a few scars. But I am in love with my life, and I know where I am---and where I'm going. There will be critics and critiques aplenty as I proceed. And sometimes, in a moment of weakness, I will let them intrude. But not for long.

Oh, and one more thing...nothing I've said here should be read as an indictment of the people making the criticisms. Usually they are people who love you. Love them back. Just keep going. At first (or maybe always) those loved ones will be amazed or even outraged that you don't listen to their "advice," and they'll *always* talk behind your back. That's okay. Just keep going. Believe it or not, it gets easier the more you do it. And they'll still love you.

I now step off of the soap box...

Yesterday I played for the third time at the Borders here in Bloomington (contact Brenda McNellen at bmcnellen@bordersstores.com or 812-333-5635). A lazy summer afternoon, and not a lot of attention to the music, but (as happens so often) I still sold a CD--from someone who had been listening in the book store---and had some nice comments afterward. The guarantee is very respectable for a Sunday afternoon show, and Bloomington is a very nice place to spend some time.

Today I head to Nashville, to spend three days with friends there and do a quickie set at the Gibson Guitar Cafe...I may even go see Billy Block at his Western Beat Roots Revival when I'm in town...that should be fun.

I'll certainly let you know!

Till then---here's some constructive advice---summer's here---get out and enjoy y'damn selves!

FIFTEEN
Stop Pay Toll

Friday
July 16, 1999
Rolling Meadows, Illinois
9:32 a.m. CDT
Tripometer: 29,743 miles

***** *****

It's an indication of how busy, distracted, crazed and generally weirded out I've been that it's been nearly a month since I last posted to this listserve. All is well, I'm pleased to report, despite the bumps and bruises that have arisen in this fourth month away from home. With a little perspective, I can see that I should have expected it. Any time a new boundary is crossed there are always unexpected delays at the crossing gate---and since this trip is the most ambitious I've yet attempted it was bound to happen. So it did. All in my head, like it always does. And eventually the little bureaucrat at the Guard Gate of the Mind signed the papers and let me through.

How's that for being needlessly wordy?

***** *****

Since our last visit summer has hit America with full force. This of course means that the highways, most of the year inhabited by working travelers like truckers, salespeople and sleep deprived folk singers, are now filled with families on vacation. And the good economy has more of them out crowding the roads than usual. Fair enough.

But like so many other aspects of life that add insult to injury, the other thing that happens to the highways of our country in the summertime---just as they are becoming crowded with mini-vans and motor homes chock full of vacationing suburbanites---is that they close.

Shut.

For road construction.

I'm getting better (no really, I am, I swear) at shedding my Californian attitude that every day should be 72 degrees and sunny. Weather is getting easier to handle (more on that in a moment). But friends let me tell you, we who live west of the Rocky Mountains have no idea how spoiled we are when it comes to road construction. The fact is, in comparison to the rest of the nation, we almost never have to deal with it.

But of course in most of the rest of the nation, during the rest of the year they get snow. And hail. And tornadoes. And hurricanes. And all that stuff tends to do a lot of damage to the roads. And for the most part, the only time of the year when the weather is clear enough to make the repairs is in the summertime.

And that means orange barrels.

They are dreaded and feared by motorists from Bangor to Boston, from Philadelphia to Fort Wayne, anywhere there's an otherwise wide-open stretch of interstate highway. We know they're coming. This traveling at 70 miles per hour won't last more than five minutes or so.

It begins slowly. First you come upon the first indication of trouble---the "WORK ZONE AHEAD 45 MPH" signs, followed by more signs that warn "FINES DOUBLED IN WORK ZONE."

And then, and then.....AARRGGHHH! There they are.

They start off in small packs, one or two on the side of the road, sort of bright plastic sentries, warning you that an army of them lies ahead.

Big, industrial-sized orange barrels. With reflective strips wrapped around them so they can be seen at night. At first they appear on the shoulder, and then suddenly they creep into the fast lane, eventually closing it off. Then more appear on the right, creating a closed-in claustrophobic-inducing one-lane nightmare, trapping you between a monstrous 18-wheeler to the rear (with its grill almost coming through your back window) and a smoke-spewing '71 Chevy with no brake lights in front of you.

Eventually you're fed onto the other side of the interstate, and the orange barrels are replaced by huge cement blocks strung together to create a wall barely separating you from the line of traffic going in the other direction just inches away. Not that there's any real danger of injury, since everyone is traveling at an average speed of three miles per hour. And then there's the part where you actually pass the area---on the side of the highway where you'd *normally* be driving---where the road work is taking place on that particular day. Huge cranes, massive trucks, enormous tractors, all sending tons of dirt and atomized concrete flying into the sky and into your air filter.

Being experienced at this phenomenon, I usually leave very early so that I have plenty of time to get where I'm going. But the tourists, especially the ones from the western states, never see it coming. There's nothing quite like peering into one of the many mini-vans stuck with me in one of these extended detours---kids in the back seat beating the shit out of each other, mom in the front screaming, dad at the wheel in a state of abject catatonia.

Sorry, bunky. There is now no way in hell you're ever going to make it to your destination anywhere near the time you thought you'd make it. Call Aunt Gladys on the cell phone (more on *that* in a minute, too) and tell her you won't be there in time for dinner. Give up. Happy trails!

After ten miles or so, the work zone finally ends, we're all back on the right side of the interstate speeding along when, just five or six miles later...an orange barrel appears on the shoulder. And it all starts over again.

Unfortunately, another byproduct of warm weather is that the State Police like to get their ticket quotas when the sun is out.

Yes, I got another ticket. In Ohio. Eighty-three bucks. Just what I needed. That makes three speeding stops this trip, two resulting in tickets. Total fines so far: \$178. Sheesh. Maybe I ought to slow down. D'ya think?

Here in Chicagoland (where I've spent this entire week) traffic is always a nightmare, but right now it's particularly unpleasant, made more so by the hot, humid summer weather. Without air conditioning, the long, expansive highways leading out to the widely-spread suburbs that spread out from Chicago in all directions would not have been possible...people would simply kill each other, or themselves, out of sheer desperation.

As I mentioned in one of my earlier posts, tollways in Chicagoland don't work in the usual way (i.e., get a ticket, travel the length of the tollway, pay when you exit); instead, toll booths appear willy-nilly out of nowhere, in the middle of the highway, and demand 15 cents here, 40 cents there, 25 cents somewhere else. So even in the best traffic conditions, you're still stopping every few miles to throw money into those little coin urinals before you can proceed. "STOP PAY TOLL," say the signs in screaming red letters. No punctuation...just STOP PAY TOLL, as if being uttered by someone from another country who doesn't know any English yet, but who has been told that all he needs to tell people is STOP PAY TOLL and they will comply.

And we do, after all, comply. We dutifully scrounge around in our pockets for the nickels and pennies as we approach, accepting without complaint that at certain unexpected points along our route, no matter how busy we are or how fast we want to get where we're going, we're just going to have to stop. And pay the toll. Then move on.

The STOP PAY TOLL signs, of course, are at toll plazas on the "normal" turnpikes, too, spread out all over the eastern U.S. Out here in the plains the roads seem to stretch on without end. I realized the other day that out here in the Northwest Suburbs of Chicago everything seemed so wide open, so vast, and I couldn't figure out why...then it hit me---no mountains! There is nothing on the horizon. Picture driving through Orange County with no mountains to give you a sense of distance.

That's what it looks like out here.

And out on the open road, out in the country, a new phenomenon has taken place virtually overnight. It's creeping me out.

It's cell phone towers.

They are everywhere, strung out along the interstates from coast to coast, and they've gone up in the blink of an eye---there were virtually NONE up last year...but now they are omnipresent.

And you really notice them when the landscape is the flattest. I first noticed them in Ohio about a month ago, long tall towers stretching into the sky like alien pods from outer space. It took me awhile to figure out what they were, and then one day while listening to the radio I heard an ad for Sprint PCS, touting their national dialing capability, "built from the ground up." Holy shit! At that moment I was staring at one of those spooky towers as I drove by, and I realized that, naturally! That's how we can all talk to each other by cell phone now, no matter where we are. But oh my. It's almost like they're reproducing themselves. Sometimes there will be a cluster of three or four of them, right there in the middle of a corn field or cow pasture. I wonder if I'm being bombarded with microwaves as I drive by, and if so, if my brain is slowly being cooked into a stewed meatball as I travel America's roads. Where's Scully and Mulder when you need them?

Summer began for me in Nashville, with my friend Jeanne and her husband Tim. Tim is a country music star in Canada, which means he can make a lot more money writing songs in Nashville, which he does. Jeanne, a friend of many years, moved to Nashville in 1993 from California to become a full-time writer. She actually got one of her songs on a mainstream album a couple of years ago, but since she's met Tim and settled down a bit she's tired of trying to compete as a songwriter herself, and is helping Tim with his radio promotion work in Canada and plugging his songs locally. I jokingly mentioned that I could sure use her services as my booking agent---and to my surprise she told me she'd consider it.

So maybe---and it's a big maybe---in another year or so I'll have booking representation, which would mean not only lifting the burden from my shoulder, but also making it much more possible to get better, higher-exposure, higher-paying gigs. It's not only tiring and time-consuming to do my own booking, it is extremely hard for an artist who represents himself to break through to the larger venues---they just won't talk to me....but if I'm represented by someone, doors might open a little bit easier. In the meantime, though, I'll keep booking myself.

In Nashville I played a two-hour set at the Gibson Guitar Cafe and Gallery (contact Tamara at custcafe@ibm.net), leading in to that night's writer's night showcase. It's a neat little place with a great sound system, but don't expect to have much of an audience---it's Nashville, and everyone there is trying to be somebody, and the most you'll get audience-wise are tourists coming in out of the heat. But what the hell, it's a great stage and it's Nashville. You never know who you'll run into.

I then played a string of Borders stores, the best of which was the store in Dayton Ohio (contact Margaret Schumaker at 937-434-1980). A very nice, big stage and always a good listening audience. This was my third visit to this store, and the first time I was not able to also get a booking on WYSO-FM, a terrific radio station out of Antioch College in Yellow Springs, due to the fact that they were having pledge week and couldn't fit me in. However, I highly recommend contacting Vick Mickunas there at <mailto:vick@wyso.org> if you're going to be in the area as it provides great exposure, and the station is a big supporter of independent music.

I've basically been all over the middle-midwest since then, the sole exception being a crazed drive back out to Mystic Connecticut to play at the Steakloft (contact Tom Timmons at 860-536-2661), right at the Mystic Seaport. A bar/restaurant gig, with a very nice guarantee but an audience that was far more appreciative of the ambiance of my music as opposed to its actual content. Strictly a money gig, but everyone involved there is totally professional and friendly.

I then drove all night (a mere 770 miles) back out to Ohio to play at Taffy's in Eaton (contact Tony or Nancy Peters at 937-456-9300). This could end up being a really fine, well-known folk venue, depending on where the Peters decide to take it. An expansive coffee house on the main street in Eaton (about 25 miles from Dayton, just ten miles east of the Indiana line), Taffy's is run by a musician (Tony) who knows how to present music.

Then it was on to Des Moines for a Borders gig--and then a day off on July 4.

I spent Independence Day in Ames Iowa at the home of BeJae Fleming and her partner, Jackie Blount. BeJae is a singer/songwriter who I met through Richard Fox, the DJ in Worcester Massachusetts I wrote about earlier. When I first appeared on Richard's program last year, he found out I was going to be in Ames, and arranged for BeJae to meet me at the show I played there.

BeJae is a rarity for me--someone who I felt immediately at home with, and comfortable with, as if I'd known her for many years, the very first time I met her. She is a well-traveled performer, having spent many years on the road as part of a duo with her former husband, and in recent years on her own. She knows, or has met, or knows something about, just about everyone who plays acoustic/folk music. And she is a terrific human.

Last year, after having just met me the day before, BeJae took me on a walk/hike through a local park/nature area near Ames, during which I think we must have discussed everything from politics to songwriting to metaphysics to who knows what. She is someone who is at once open, funny, interesting and interested. I am always amazed when I run into someone who *listens* as much as speaks (certainly that would not include me!)...BeJae is one of those people.

This year she and Jackie invited me over to watch the annual Fourth of July Parade organized by the people on her block, and the ensuing block party.

The heat that weekend was immense--the combined temperature and humidity had the heat index up to almost 100 degrees. When it gets that hot and humid, walking outside from an air conditioned house is like being slapped in the face--it hits that hard. So we didn't spend too much time outside during the daylight hours...with the exception of the parade, of course.

The parade itself was a real hoot--consisting of (mostly) kids on their bicycles, kids on foot, kids everywhere, with a few grownups. There was a huge buildup. Excitement grew as the 11:30 a.m. start time approached.

The neighborhood had managed to get the Ames Fire Department to provide an honest-to-goodness fire truck! With actual firemen to drive it! So there it stood, its motor idling, everyone else lining up for the big moment when the parade would get underway.

And then---there they came! First the Grand Marshals---a local mom and dad sitting on the back of a flatbed truck, waving to the crowd. Then came the kids and their costumes. I mentioned to BeJae that the parade needed floats, and she pointed out that there were plenty of them---and she was right! They were human floats! The one I remember best was the Betsy Ross float, which consisted of an old Singer sewing machine bolted to a platform which a kid wore like a suit of armor to create the image of a walking sewing machine, with a flag-in-progress draped over it! Brilliant! All the neighbors sat and stood along the curb cheering and making noise---and then at the very end the fire engine revved up and brought up the rear. Truly exciting!

The entire parade lasted five minutes. But I have to say it was the most fun I ever had at a parade.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in the house with various friends and neighbors. Jackie and BeJae both cooked---including some remarkable, delicious Iowa beefsteaks that were absolutely fabulous. I met a lot of people that day, and was made privy to a lot of the neighborhood gossip (I felt very privileged!)...in the late afternoon we went down the street to watch the watermelon seed spitting contest.

Later we walked over a few blocks, where I met more friends, had some home made ice cream and generally relaxed, a feeling that was more than welcome after the previous few days' driving madness from Ohio to Connecticut back to Ohio to Iowa...

We ended the day, just the three of us, me, BeJae and Jackie, walking over to the Iowa State University campus to watch the Ames fireworks show, which was viewed by, I think, just about everyone in town.

We walked back to the house, and as in the year before, BeJae and I started talking about the music business. We continued the conversation for at least an hour after we got back to the house. It was a very important discussion, because even though I don't think she realized it, BeJae forced me to confront the bare bones of my dreams. Not an easy thing to do, but she did it simply by being herself---that is, by asking direct questions and by listening intently to my responses.

She pointed out that surely I couldn't keep making crazy drives from one part of the country to another forever. What, she asked, did I want out of all of this? Where was I going?

Ooooooh.

The thing is, after stumbling around a bit, I was able to be as honest as she was, and I knew the answer to her question.

I want a house. I want money in the bank. I want to put out an album every couple of years. I want to tour at least half of the year.

That's it.

And saying it so clearly, out loud, made it all the more evident how hard it was going to be, but also how attainable it really is. I needed to hear myself say the words, and it was almost like BeJae knew that. Whatever the motivation, I'm glad she asked.

...and all the while we were having this conversation, with BeJae interspersing her own experiences with the ups and downs of being a performing songwriter, I was taken by how close, how in love, she and Jackie are, and how they seem to so naturally make their relationship work. Jackie is a professor at the university, and she is also a French horn player. BeJae convinced her to take up the bass, and now Jackie accompanies BeJae in her live shows whenever possible. (Jackie, herself a sweet and gentle soul, proudly handed me her recently-acquired Fender bass, which I fumbled with a bit but only managed a few grunts out of, at which point I had the good sense to cease and desist...)

It made me wonder, sitting there talking about this goal I'm so feverishly pursuing, seeing BeJae and Jackie so comfortably in love with each other, how or if I will ever attain enough balance to find a life partnership of such strength and durability. I still believe that finding such a partnership is a crucial part of life, and that something will happen before I die...who knows when? My experiences with love and romance, especially those in the past year, have taught me that I am not ready to make it a high priority just yet...that much I know. First I have to find peace in my career. Finding a woman to share my life with doesn't make sense to me now, since I'm still making my path. But what struck me as I witnessed the depth of love between BeJae and Jackie was that maybe it was possible to find someone to share this journey with.

Could be. We'll see. I'm not going to sit around and wait for it, though. I have work to do.

On July 7 I returned to the Barking Spider Tavern in Cleveland (contact Martin Juredine at 216-421-2863), a folk bar that sits directly next door to the Arabica University Circle Coffeehouse where I'd played last month. This place is totally unique---wide open doors and windows, a woodsy decor inside with a definite "bar" vibe. But here's the thing---Martin does not limit himself to booking your typical bar bands at the Barking Spider---he books folk and acoustic acts (some big names have played there), which is odd in this setting. You'd expect to hear a jukebox playing Ted Nugent records if you just looked at the place. But view it a little more closely and you'll notice a concert grand piano stage left of the performing area...and no jukebox. Definitely an interesting gig. I took advantage of the piano and opened my second set with five or six numbers on it...felt good. I may consider bringing a keyboard with me on tour again.

Driving into Cleveland the day before, I encountered some of that weather that makes life in the eastern U.S. so exciting. I later saw on a local TV weather report how the storm had formed, essentially out of nowhere, when some warm air suddenly met some cooler air near Lake Erie and BOOM. Just 20 miles from my destination, the radio started flashing emergency alert warnings (you know, the ones you normally only hear *tests* for) about severe thunderstorms and told us all to stay indoors if possible. At times the rain came down so hard I could not see the car in front of me. It was as if God had a mammoth bucket of water and was pouring it on all of us. Huge, long, dramatic lightning bolts fell out of the sky everywhere.

And then it stopped. Just like that.

This is summertime in the East.

The Blue Mountain Coffee Company in Cincinnati (contact Jana O'Neill at 513-871-8626) is another small but nice mid-week gig. Situated in the upscale Mount Lookout area of Cincinnati, they had me play outside on the sidewalk at dusk, and it was very laid back. The guarantee paid for my motel room that night, and I sold a couple of CDs.

I played a show at the Borders Book Shop in Indianapolis (contact Michael Ries at 317-841-7232) on July 9. This is the last remaining Borders that is a book shop only *and* without a cafe. Michael told me that they will probably be moving to a bigger location, with a music store and a cafe, within the year. Michael is a big supporter of my music, and he and his wife came to hear me play and sang along with my songs, which made the night that much sweeter.

After the show in Indianapolis, I hooked up with Judy Krueger, who was in town staying with relatives during her own tour. She had played that night in Bloomington, about an hour south of Indianapolis, and afterward she met me at my motel and we had a late night meal at a local diner. This was a real treat--meeting a fellow L.A. singer/songwriter, on the road--a friend from home!--in a place far away from where we both live. We had a great conversation. Judy just began touring this year, and she is very excited about the prospects for the future. It was very important for me to hear her enthusiasm that night, as I had reached a wall and was just plain exhausted (see below). I hope I see Judy and many more of my friends from home out on the road like this--it's a real boost.

It was then back to the Cleveland area for two more uneventful Borders gigs, then on to Chicagoland, where I'm playing mostly Borders, the sole exception being this past Wednesday, when I played at the Uncommon Grounds in Wrigleyville, right in the heart of Chicago's North Side and just around the corner from Wrigley Field.

I got the gig through Ellen Rosner (*diva@uic.edu*), who is very active in Indiegrl and just generally active in Chicago folk music. Ellen got me the gig on the spur of the moment, the regular Wednesday showcase for C.H.A.T. (I forget what that stands for). Unfortunately, the booking got a bit confused, and it ended up that there was no promotion for the show. So Ellen played a couple of songs, as did a couple of other songwriters there...and I played four of mine...and that was about it. Ellen was incredibly generous, and promised me that next time I'll get a prominent spot on one of her own showcases. I was very impressed with her, and would recommend contacting her if you're going to be in Chicago or environs.

The evening was not a loss by any means, though, because it was a beautiful evening and I arrived early. It was the last day of baseball's All Star Break, so the Cubs weren't playing, meaning I easily found a parking spot. I walked to the corner of Waveland and Clark, where the Tuscany on Clark restaurant sits. There I had a leisurely meal...fresh bread dipped in olive oil, romano and garlic, home made minestrone with huge chunks of carrots and zucchini, fettuccine lightly sauteed in olive oil with veal, fresh garlic, tomato, spinach and onion. And all the while looking out onto Waveland Avenue, directly in to Wrigley Field, the sky a perfect purple/blue as the sun set, with little specks of clouds that looked like cotton balls floating in the middle of it. Moments like this, sometimes even more than the great nights onstage, are the ones I will keep forever. They are the moments to treasure, and thank God, I do. I really do.

Two weeks from tomorrow I'll be home, playing the final show of this tour at Bean Town in Sierra Madre...it still seems like a million miles away.

But as soon as that show is over, I start moving into my new place, in with a room mate I have only met on the phone. My home, when I arrive there, will be devoid of many of my belongings, which have been sold off in my absence, at my direction. Whatever is left will have to be carted away by...who? A junker? I don't know what I'll do. I just have to be out of the place, and have it empty, by the end of the following week.

In addition to freaking out about the move, recent weeks have had me finalizing all the arrangements for my fall tour, which begins just a month after I return home. I'm worried about having/making enough money, of course, while I'm doing all the planning, but it's the work itself, out here on the road, while I'm doing everything else, that is the huge hassle and can totally fry me.

On Tuesday night, after a Borders show, I came back to my motel, had dinner, then stayed up until four in the morning preparing a massive publicity mailing for the fall tour. First I went to my database of radio stations, then I sorted by zip code all the stations in the areas where I'll be playing, then I used the mail function to print professionally printed envelopes to the stations, then I prepared press releases specially-prepared for each radio market...then I slept for a few hours, got up, went to Office Depot to make some copies, then spent another six hours or so stuffing envelopes....overall, twelve hours of time, and only an hour to take a brief nap before I had to drive to Chicago to play that night. Earlier in the week I did a publicity mailing for my two L.A. shows in August...then there was the two days it took to plan out the motels where I'll be staying on the fall tour, and calling the motel chains to make the reservations, then typing my itinerary...and all the while day job work keeps coming in over the phone and e-mail...and on it goes.

...and no new songs.

...and I need sleep.

...and then the mail from work comes in...

...and then here I am today, having gotten most of the publicity work done, having gotten most of my itinerary typed, after completing the lion's share of day job work, after getting a full-night's sleep.

And I stop. Pay the toll. And there's another stretch of clear highway ahead. And for now, life is a breeze.

This is not only the life I choose, it is the life I *need*, no matter how difficult it gets. I stay in the car until I get to where I'm going. I'm not crazy or arrogant enough to know the exact location of that final destination, but I do know that it is not the time to stop. Not now. I'll just watch for the orange barrels and make sure to obey the speed laws (as much as possible!).

On to the final stretch of this tour then....

SIXTEEN
Brushstrokes

Thursday
July 29, 1999
Salina, Utah
9:32 p.m. MDT
Tripometer: 33,265 miles

***** *****

So this is the last night in a motel for me--for a month, at least. Tomorrow I play in Cedar City (about 150 miles or so from here), then when the show is over I'll drive overnight back to Sierra Madre, where my house, now mostly empty, will welcome me for a couple of final nights before I spend my first evening in my new quarters...

It is quite odd, now a third of a year after leaving, that the person who returns (in addition to weighing probably ten pounds more than he did when he left--but no moaning about that tonight) has changed into someone so different. When I departed my cottage on March 29, I had not an inkling that a couple of months into the tour, thousands of miles away, I would make the decision to move out, and to have most of my possessions sold in my absence, and to trust a friend to find me a room mate, and to do it all in stride, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

But here I am, coming home to such extreme change it hardly seems possible that it has all come to pass. But it's true--a week from right now I'll be living in someone else's home, in a room. No more total privacy. I'll have to observe manners and proper room-mate behavior, whatever that is...oh Jesus what have I done?!

Oh never mind. I know exactly what I've done...and again, the amazing thing isn't that I've done it, but that I've done it with such ease of purpose. Never has anything so important taken such little amount of work, emotionally or physically. I guess it's meant to be.

I hope, anyway.

***** *****

The past couple of weeks have been extremely fulfilling, from the performing standpoint. As soon as I left Chicago for the final stretch of this tour, something just sort of snapped--and I began connecting with audiences like I hadn't been able to before. Nothing earth-shattering, just all of a sudden one of those barely-discernable turns in the road took place, and all the experience leading up to it just came to the fore one night in St. Louis.

I had driven all night from Chicago to St. Louis, arriving on the outskirts of town in the early morning hours. I managed to find a motel that would let me check in that early (and still count the stay as that night instead of the previous night--motel rules are bizarre and complicated at times). I showered and drove straight to the studios of KDHX, where I was the guest of Clint Harding (*bluehighways@kdhx.org*) on "Blue Highways." I was exhausted, but managed to stay coherent enough to conduct a brief interview with Clint, who I met last year when I came through town. I sang a couple of songs and promoted my show that night, then drove back to my motel and slept like a rock for six straight hours.

At 4:00 p.m. I checked out of my motel, had dinner, then went to the Borders store in Creve Coeur (a St. Louis suburb). It was during the second or third song that I noticed how the audience was reacting to me...and then about half-an-hour into the first set I noticed how my body language and my banter had changed...the attention of the audience and my sudden self-awareness combined for a powerful, extremely rewarding night. And somehow, I knew it wasn't a fluke...I knew that something had changed, something that had taken months--maybe years--to get accomplished. In the larger scheme of things, this new "connectivity" with my audience is just another small step, another tool I've honed in the long, grueling hours of touring...but right now, it's a pretty big deal to understand that I can have that connection.

Immediately after the show, I got in the car and drove 500 miles straight to Atlanta, where I played the make-up show for the show they had forgotten about back in May. It was pretty weird, driving from one Borders store to another--500 miles away--getting out of the car, playing my show (in the *same clothes* I wore the night before in St. Louis---eeeewww!), then getting in the car and driving back up to Nashville, where I stayed with my friends Jeanne and Tim for the third time on this trip.

Next it was up to Champaign/Urbana, Illinois, where I did two radio shows and a performance for a local acoustic music series.

Of the two radio shows, the biggest kick was with Bruce Bergethon (*blberge@ilstu.edu*) of WGLT in Normal. WGLT is the region's big NPR station, which features mostly jazz, but has a fair amount of folk/Americana programming. Bruce is the Program Director of the station, but is also the host of the folk programs on WGLT. We did a show called "The Live Show," which is actually a pre-recorded, hour-long performance/interview program featuring artists and bands touring through the WGLT listening area. Total fun! State-of-the-art recording facilities and top-notch engineering, plus Bruce is a very good interviewer.

The live show was for the Parkland Cornstalk Concert Series (contact Nicholas Cepeda at *ncepeda@faroe.vp.uiuc.edu*) at Parkland Community College in Champaign. A small audience, but again, I connected in a way that felt absolutely electric. The small turnout, though, did not bode well with the organizers...I have a feeling that it'll take some work to get back as a headliner in this series...but a small bump in an otherwise smooth experience...

By this time the heat in the midwest had turned vicious. In Champaign (I was there four nights) the temperature and humidity combined for heat indices well over 100 degrees. When I got to Kansas City last weekend, the heat index reached 115 degrees at one point.

I had three more remarkable performances in the Kansas City area over the weekend. I can't really explain what's going on and do it any justice...but it sure feels good! At one point during the performance of one of my love songs, which is a moderate tempo, 3/4 time ballad, a couple in the audience got up and began *waltzing* around the cafe! Magic. Magic.

And then Sunday afternoon I left Kansas City and drove all night, through the Great Plains and into Denver, then over the mountains into Grand Junction, Colorado, on the Western Slope of the Rockies. I found myself heading into town at dawn, the sunrise revealing the first hint of home.

Where there had been mind-numbing humid heat the day before in Kansas, there was now the dry, plain, blast-furnace heat of the desert. The smells were different, too. Fragrances so subtle as to defy description, but which are loaded with the smells of the West.

Yesterday I did a live radio gig on KAFM, a brand new (five months on the air) community radio station in Grand Junction (contact Campbell Stanton at 970-241-8801), where they don't get many live touring artists, and they were really happy to have me as a guest. I promoted my appearance at Main Street Bagels in downtown Grand Junction the next day...and that was today. I found out about Main Street Bagels (contact Mark or Missy Smith at 970-241-2740) through Musi-Cal, when I saw that Cosy Sheridan had played there last year. It is a fine place to play, even though they can usually only have music during the day and they can't give you any guarantee. I played outside on a beautiful late morning, before it got too hot, and people from all over downtown sat down, listened, bought CDs and had a grand time.

And then I headed for Utah.

I had intended to drive all the way to Cedar City, but about halfway there the scene beyond my windshield became a turbulent, angry, beautiful oil painting.

Clouds, dark on their undersides and fluffy white on top, began accumulating in the sky, mixing patches of bright blue with platinum gray, blazing sunlight with cool shade. The mesas in the distance, the astoundingly intricate rock formations right beside the interstate, suddenly met with the sky in a furious rush of color and action.

I could feel wind rushing around my car in all directions. Driving in clear sunlight, suddenly rain would drench the automobile for thirty seconds, then stop. In the far distance, huge bolts of lightning came tumbling from a massive block of charcoal-gray thunderheads, their downpour highlighted by the sunlight in another part of the sky as silvery brushstrokes, haphazard and frightening, terrible and exquisite and...

...Holy Mother of Christ I'd better get the hell off the road!

...and I did. Here in Salina. And I unloaded the car just in time to avoid getting drenched.

...and now here I am, and oh yes. Yes, of course. This is the place.

A small patch of desert. Nothing but earth and sky a hundred miles in any direction. A lonely stretch of highway in front of a flickering Best Western sign. Rain pouring down as a slow-moving 18-wheeler ambles by. Thunder rolls in the distance.

I get a chill.

This is that solitary place I have dreamed of so many times. Always the desert. Always alone. Always with a big---huge---sky all around me. Safe inside watching it all. This is the place I crave, and have craved all my life. It is the place I keep returning to, in my mind, in my heart, and now in my actual experience. I want to be in this place more than any other.

Maybe someday---maybe someday *soon*, in fact---I'll capture whatever it is that wanders through my bloodstream to pull me to this place. For now, knowing that I am doing the thing I was born to do while I answer its call, while I paint my own crazed brushstrokes on the canvas, that is enough. It's more than enough.

***** *****

This is my final missive from this trip. I will be back on the road again very soon---I leave for a three-month fall tour on September 1---and I will no doubt send more messages from there. As time progresses, these notes will become less and less frequent, as I don't want to repeat myself and I want to make sure that I have something interesting to say, if I decide to say anything. But I *will* continue to write, as long as you want me to. If you or I feel it's time to stop, I'll stop. Just let Tom know---he'll make sure I stop!

Thanks to all of you who reply to me with your thoughts and comments. It's a blessing to be able to send these messages, to talk to myself with you all looking over my shoulder. I do *not* take it, or you, for granted.

I hope I see as many of you as possible when I'm home in August. In any event, please keep sending me messages to let me know how *you're* doing.

Talk to you soon---

Love

Mark

The Autumn 1999 Tour

SEVENTEEN
High Lonesome

Thursday
September 30, 1999
Grand Island, Nebraska
6:26 a.m. CDT
Tripometer: 7,441 miles

***** *****

It's still dark here on the plain. My window, which faces west, looks out beyond the motel parking lot to a group of drab, modern housing units (apartments? condos?) a few hundred feet away. Beyond these buildings lies the northern outskirts of Grand Island, a broad, flat expanse of mostly barren Nebraska farm land; a few patches of late summer/early autumn corn awaiting harvest, the rest of the countryside ready to sleep for the winter. And immediately alongside the highway are the railroad tracks that send freight trains passing by almost every hour of the night. I am a three-minute walk away from hopping a train and leaving everything behind, if I were inclined to do such a thing.

Which I'm not.

***** *****

It's now been exactly two months and one day since I posted my last message to this listserve. Two days after I sent it, I was back home in L.A., feverishly moving the remainder of my possessions into my new lodgings in Sierra Madre.

Everything I own, save a couple of odds and ends which reside at the homes of friends, now lives with me in a single room, the master bedroom of a two-bedroom apartment. Every reminder of what had been a comfortable, suburban lifestyle is now gone, and I'm living like a student in a dormitory.

It's odd, but I'm not complaining. I have already saved enough money in rent over the past two months that I've been able to pay off one old outstanding personal debt and begin working on the three or four other long-term revolving credit accounts that have been nagging me for so long. On the other hand, I know that I will not be able to live in such cramped accommodations for too long. As long as I'm out on the road this much though, it will work out fine.

My house mate is a 27 year-old aspiring actor, a nice guy who shares my respect for privacy and discretion. In the month I lived there before heading out again, we mostly stayed out of each others' way while getting to know the other's habits. I put a lock on my door to add a layer of (at least perceived) privacy, got a dorm-sized refrigerator, a small television and managed to fit all the artwork from the old place onto the four walls of the bedroom. There's enough room to move around and get work done, but it's not a home.

Naturally, I have free reign, if I so choose, to use the living room downstairs and the patio that comes with the apartment. But all the furniture and other appointments in those parts of the place belong to my house mate, and it still feels odd to trounce around in someone else's stuff.

There were moments in that first month in this new living arrangement when I asked myself what the hell I was doing...but before I had too much time to think about it, I was out again. And it all made perfect sense.

This tour began in weird fashion. Although I had planned to start out in Las Vegas and then work my way to the upper midwest, a few weeks before I left I got an offer to play at Sweet Eugene's Coffee House in College Station, Texas (contact Matt Brown at 409-696-5282), just down the road from Austin and only a stone's throw from Texas A&M University. Since I had been looking for a way to get my foot in the door in the Austin area, and since the guarantee was substantial, I decided to leave a week early, go to Texas, then drive all the way back to Las Vegas to continue the tour as originally planned.

The show itself at Sweet Eugene's was tough. The place was absolutely packed with college kids just returned from summer vacation. But I might as well have been onstage singing Debbie Boone covers...nobody noticed me there. And I mean nobody, baby, until toward the end of my third and final set, when one kid toward the front felt sorry for me and half-heartedly attempted to lead the crowd in applause. I appreciated the effort, but by that time it was just "pay me and goodnight."

However, my main mission was accomplished. The day of the show I did a live radio appearance on KEOS-FM in Bryan, right next door to College Station (contact Music Director John Roths at jroths@mail.tca.net), and the people there were terrific. One of the DJs provided me with a large list of venues in Austin and environs, and that list has already yielded one booking at a club in Austin during the big South by Southwest event in March. So although the time and money spent to go the extra distance more than ate up the guarantee I got, the overall benefits outweighed the nuisance factor by a large degree.

I then journeyed back to Las Vegas for three shows the following weekend. I was joined there by Karen, an artist and poet from L.A., and it was the best thing in the world to share the experience with someone else. If Karen hadn't been there, I would have probably just holed up in my room, venturing out only to do my shows, too terrified that I'd lose the little money I had at a blackjack table.

Instead, Karen and I had a great time doing the "Vegas Thing." We walked around a couple of the new, big (ridiculously ridiculous, actually) hotels. I got my blackjack jones satisfied when Karen herself sat down at a ten dollar table and cleaned up. The one disappointment was that the day we planned on visiting the Liberace Museum (can you think of anything more Vegas?), it was closed during the time we were going to go....that will be the *first* place I visit next time!

The shows were largely uneventful, but it is nice to know there are places to play folk/acoustic music in such a glitzy place.

Most interesting was the Enigma Garden Cafe (contact Len Addams at enigma@radiant.org), which is an honest-to-God artist hangout/coffeehouse, right in the middle of the one city in America where you wouldn't expect to find one. The audience consists of a ragtag group of regulars, whom I determined would have liked me more if I had been less...er...*folky*, but I yam who I yam...I did two sets and flew the coop. But I recommend the Enigma to any poet or alternative-leaning folkie passing through Vegas.

Of the two Borders gigs I did in Vegas, the best was at the Rainbow/Lake Mead location (contact Dustin Curtis at 702-638-0154), where I had a very good audience (including a sweet little girl named Emma, who danced the entire time) and sold enough CDs to afford a really nice dinner that night. Yes, I should have saved it, but what the hell...at least I didn't gamble it away...well not that much of it anyway...

On my last day in Vegas, one of the many "folk angels" I've met in my travels came to hear me play. His name is Paul, and he lives in Cedar City, Utah. I was greatly flattered that he drove down to spend some time, and he brought me tapes of some folk albums he knew I didn't have, to listen to as I drive. This is one of the blessings of this lifestyle---the people, the wonderful, giving people, who seem to be everywhere around the country, and who give so much of themselves to the artists who make the music they listen to.

And then suddenly I was on my own again, first in Salt Lake City, then in Nebraska, then in Iowa...and just as suddenly autumn permeated the air. It had been so hot all August long in L.A., and then again in Texas, and all the way back to Las Vegas. But now the temperatures dropped, and I stopped using the air conditioning in my motel rooms. The sky turned a richer, deeper blue. And I was alone, again alone. The inevitability of the solitude inherent in this lifestyle began to evolve into something else, something I'm still experiencing as I write this...but more on that in a minute...

I discovered another terrific Borders venue, this one in Davenport, Iowa (contact Ann Beuchler at 319- 359-1630). Here they have a regular Friday night folk crowd that comes out to really listen to music. Chairs are set up in front of the cafe, and the music is played in an area next to the book store, not actually in the cafe area. Great response, and generous financial support in the form of CD sales, in addition to the decent guarantee.

It was then back to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where, as I had last year, I played at the Espresso Royale Cafe. On my way to the show, my rental car began stalling out, and during the break I called to ask for another car, which was delivered to me, right there in front of the cafe. And this is why we rent our cars.

On then to uneventful Borders shows in Indiana and Illinois...and then back to Des Moines Iowa. Oh my.

During the spring/summer tour, I told you about my friend BeJae Fleming, with whom I spent July 4 earlier this year. Bless her, she drove down from Ames to come and listen to me play at the Court Avenue Brewing Company in downtown Des Moines this past Sunday. Court Avenue (contact Mike Utley at 515-282-2739) is a bar and restaurant, one of those places that books acoustic music instead of bands on Sunday nights to give their clientele "variety." And it's one of those places that you play because the guarantee is so good it doesn't really matter that it's a bar and you're basically doing background music...as long as I can play my own original material, it's all fine with me.

BeJae herself plays there, and I know that a number of other touring singer/songwriters do too. During the first two sets the crowd applauded and many listened more intently than audience members do in more folk-appropriate settings.

But then came the third set. A classic.

I was sitting at BeJae's table during my final break, chatting away, when I heard a loud noise behind me and to my left. I turned around to see a group of five people--two women, three men--loudly scooting two tables together--and over to the stage area. They were boisterous. Loud. Loudly boisterous. Before I had a chance to think, they had set up shop *right* in front of the microphones, and one of the women was standing in front of the vocal mic, trying to say something (or, God help us, sing something).

I rushed over to her and was immediately accosted by one of her male companions, a jolly fellow who had imbibed one too many rum and Cokes. He jubilantly informed me that both his lady friend *and* he himself loved to sing, and could they sing with me? I gently told them that it was "against the rules" for me to let them sing with me (a very good standby line, by the way, whether it's true or not), and that got the woman to back down. But not Mister Rum and Coke. Throughout the remainder of the evening he would continually try to sing with me.

All five of them sat down at their table, which completely blocked me from the view of the rest of the audience. I essentially played my entire third set to these five happily-intoxicated folks; they were so close to me I could have reached over and grabbed a fried cheese stick from their table and munched on it.

But not only were they close to me...they were loud. A wall of high-volume talking and laughing from their table came at me in waves so strong that at times I couldn't even hear myself singing. Mister Rum and Coke would react to certain lyrics in my songs by suddenly and without warning standing up, walking right up to my face and yelling "YEAH! WOOO! LET ME SING! YEAH!" He also took to calling me "Chief." So after awhile he would be in my face yelling "HEY CHIEF! HOW'S IT GOING CHIEF?! YEAH! WOOOO! LET ME SING ONE CHIEF!"

Other than my new friends at the Table from Hell, the only other audience member I could see was BeJae, over toward stage right, who sat there and watched and listened and just generally made me feel like I was doing something worth continuing...I ended up just singing the songs to her and praying for the hour to end.

And it did. And when it did, the entire Table from Hell got up and left. Like they couldn't have left me at least *one* song to sing to the rest of the room...

Ah well. Afterward BeJae and I had a late meal at a coffee shop and mused over the wackiness of it all. Again, it is crucial when taking on the life of a traveling artist that there are people, like Paul in Vegas or BeJae in Des Moines, who come into the picture, and it is even more crucial that I keep them in the picture and embrace their worth. Without them the loneliness of this way of life could *become* a way of life.

Last night I played at the Blue Moon Coffee House in Hastings, some 25 miles south of here. The owner, Patty Jones(402-462-5214) runs a delightful place, usually open during lunchtime only, but for musical performances she opens up again in the evening. I got some local newspaper and radio exposure, so the place filled up nicely, and although there was no guarantee I made more money in CD sales and tips than I usually do on weekend nights. I would never have expected such a friendly attentive turnout in the middle of the week. But there you go...this is a great place to check out for anyone touring through the area.

I drove back to Grand Island through the cold autumn evening, watching rows and rows of corn fly by me on the side of the road. Very shortly they will be gone as the fall harvest ends and the harsh chill of winter falls on these fields. I got out of the car here at my motel to the sound of an approaching freight train. I could hear the lonely wail of its horn and see the light of the engine a mile or so away. In all my travels, no matter how far I end up roaming, I know I will never encounter anything so moving as the sound of a train in the night.

Last Saturday night I was in Rockford, Illinois, northwest of Chicago, having just played one of those difficult, "why am I here" shows at a Borders where, it seemed, no one knew or cared if I existed. I was exhausted. I felt as if the world had turned into something foreign and unfamiliar.

I turned on the radio and hit the "Seek" button, hoping to come across some sports talk station to take my mind off the evening. And suddenly, as clear as a bell, there just before 11:00 at night in Rockford Illinois, came the sound of raw, organic familiarity.

Fiddles. Banjos. Guitars picking and bass thumping and hands clapping.

I had picked up WSM out of Nashville, 650 on the AM radio dial. It was Saturday night. It was the Grand Ole Opry.

For nearly 75 years WSM has carried the Opry, its 50,000 watt clear channel signal reaching into homes as far east as the Caribbean, as far north as Canada, south into Mexico and sometimes, when the wind is right, even into the Pacific Northwest. It is the closest thing to an authentic tradition as America has anymore.

And something clear happened when I heard that music, something true and real. I was connected with my parents, and their parents, who had heard this same broadcast, at that same wavelength on the dial, when they were young. I was connected to an uninterrupted, continuous line of history encompassing more than a quarter of the life of this nation. More than the music itself, but inexorably tied to it, this joyous and unpretentious shout from its Heartland every Saturday night insists that love and laughter and just plain *fun* are as much a part of our heritage as the harshness of a day spent at hard labor or the pain of a broken heart; that they are all of the same material, something uniquely American that cannot be spoken in any other way than in the sound of a train in the distance on a cold night, or in the high lonesome chorus of an old familiar song, pulled in on a wavering radio wave, from far away, in the middle of the night.

I was home. I am home.

***** *****

Much is changing. I haven't got my finger on what it is yet. But it involves staying out here. I am way behind on the business end of things...on off-days, after my day-job work is done and I intend to make booking calls, I end up daydreaming or driving through the country. There is a burning going on inside, and something is telling me that everything is all right, and not to worry. I'll get the bookings. I'll stay out on the road. I'll even write some songs. Hey, now there's an idea...

More next time.

Stay in touch.

EIGHTEEN
World Serious

Wednesday
October 27, 1999
Menomonie, Wisconsin
9:15 p.m. CDT
Tripometer: 12,155 miles

***** *****

Rod Smear is going to be pissed.

It's the top of the seventh and the New York Goddamned Yankees are ahead of the Braves, 3-0 in Game 4 of the World Series. It looks bad for the Atlantas (as Ernie Harwell would say), as they are down to their last nine outs in an attempt to salvage at least one game in this year's Series, the Yanks having swept the first three games. Roger Clemens, who has had a mediocre season, is suddenly pitching like Roger Clemens and the Yankee infield is making spectacular plays behind him. It's ovah, baby.

And Rod knows it. So do I.

Since the playoffs started, I've been calling Rod at home every few nights to get his take on the Major League postseason. For those of you who don't know, Rod (among many other things) is an avid Dodger fan, and a walking baseball encyclopedia. And he has a pure love for the game, a poet's affinity for baseball that transcends the statistics and win/loss columns. He's just fun to talk to when he's revved up about the game.

Like most baseball lovers who didn't grow up within a day's drive of the World Trade Center, Rod and I both hate the Yankees, not just because they've won more than 25% of all World Series ever played, but because Yankee fans are the most obnoxious in any sport. We can't stand it when they win, and we foolishly let our hearts overtake our heads when dealing with friends who happen to be Yankee fans.

So we bet. Money. Against the Yankees. And we lose.

There are always Yankee fans. Everywhere there are Yankee fans. New Yorkers have a tendency to leave New York and settle in other parts of the country, where they proceed to criticize the local customs, weather, entertainment, culture, you name it...and visit the local ballpark garbed in Yankee paraphernalia, making themselves generally obnoxious. And so it is in L.A., in spades. Rod and I both bet money--I during the American League Championship Series, when I somehow convinced myself that the Red Sox would finally overcome 91 years of bad luck and beat New York (WRONG), and Rod during the Series (evidently, again, WRONG). We bet ex-New Yorkers who now live in L.A. and with whom we otherwise have fine, friendly relationships, that the Yankees would burn in hell...or at least lose...and once again we're going to have to eat our words.

So tonight after the Yanks have recorded the final out and start throwing champagne all over their clubhouse, I will crank up my AT&T Calling Card and dial Smear Man, to console him and myself as we watch the century's greatest sports franchise, and its fans, rub it in. Hey, a new century will start soon...maybe it'll be the Dodgers Century...one can dream. As Rod would say...."later days..."

So what, you're wondering, does any of the above have to do with playing folk music on the road? The key phrase there is "on the road," where after awhile the long days and nights of talking to oneself become tiresome and more than a little scary. So one looks for a voice from home. Sometimes several.

I go through phases, usually once a month or so, when I'm traveling, where I spend a couple of nights just calling friends back home, to hear their voices, even if it's only for five or ten minutes. To be sure, e-mail has made it much easier to combat the feeling of detachment from friends, relatives and other loved ones, since it is widely available and immediate and very inexpensive. But eventually even written words cannot take the place of a voice from home; authentic, tangible evidence that those people who I now must allow to live almost exclusively in my heart and head do, in fact, exist.

So I've been filling this need to communicate over the past couple of weeks by calling Rod Smear after significant postseason ballgames. It's fun, and it's Rod, for crying out loud, so it's always substantive. In ways I sometimes never expect...

So let's see...where has the month gone?

I ended September at the Espresso Coffee Shop in North Platte, Nebraska (contact Linda Mooney at 308-534-9550), a fine little outpost where the audience was small but appreciative. I got in my car immediately after the show and drove straight to Mankato, Minnesota overnight.

It was October 1, and it was snowing. I mean, big, wet snow that downed power lines and made everything look like a Christmas card. I only freaked out a little bit. This unexpected early downfall reminded me that I didn't have an ice scraper/brush, which is necessary on icy mornings in order to see out of the car window...so I went to a local mini-mart and bought one, fearing the worst...which didn't happen. The next day the snow was gone and the weather was clear. Whew!

The night of the snowstorm I played at the Coffee Hag in Mankato (contact Lisa or Patty at 507-397-5533), which is a very cool listening room right in the heart of this bustling college town...naturally, the big Friday night crowd I had been promised stayed at home because of the snow, and I was more than a little bummed, especially after having driven all night to get there. On the plus side, though, was the radio interview I did earlier in the day with Fred Vette (*frederick.vette@mankato.msus.edu*) at KMSU-FM, the incredibly fun, eclectic music station out of the university there in Mankato. Fred runs a tight show, and did a terrific interview, handling with pure aplomb what could have been a disaster when I broke a string while playing a song on the air (eeeeek!!!)...he just vamped some upcoming events while I changed strings, and three minutes later I was back on the air, singing and playing again. Quite an experience.

The next day I drove up to St. Paul and played at the Borders store there, then got in the car and drove all night to Cleveland, where I once again played at the Arabica University Circle Coffeehouse, which I wrote of earlier this year. The manager, Chuck Diamond, was once again very helpful in getting the audience to (at least consider) purchasing my CDs, and he invited me back again as soon as possible. Since I was playing indoors this time (as opposed to the front patio, where I played during the summer), I availed myself of the piano which the cafe keeps inside, and played a set of my older songs on the keyboard. It was a revelation, how easily those old songs came to me and how well I played. My first instrument was the piano, and it has been too long since I played it for any length of time. I told myself that wherever there was a piano, I'd play it from then on.

Next it was up to Ann Arbor Michigan once again, this time to play at the Borders Mother Ship. For a Monday night, it went well enough, and the staff was particularly friendly and helpful.

I didn't realize it, but I was beginning to get mentally and physically worn out by all the driving, and all the lightly-attended shows. Since the end of September, just about every venue had been promising, but very few people showed up to hear me play. Despite my determination to push through such trying times, my subconscious, along with my tired body, was beginning to wear thin. The following weekend didn't help at all.

I returned to north-central Wisconsin, where I had such a great time last year, and nothing seemed to work correctly. I did the same radio show as I did last year, but this year it had a new host, who seemed to like alternative music more than folk music...she barely interviewed me and seemed disinterested the entire time. The show I plugged, at a nearby cafe, was attended by exactly four people, plus the owner, his wife and daughter. To be sure, the people who did come were great fans, and I played a full show sitting with them, in a circle, in the audience rather than onstage. It was very satisfying emotionally...but that whole subconscious-wearing-thin thing continued without me knowing it...I think I was more upset about the lack of audience (and door money) than I let myself know...

The next night I played my first "major" folk club of the tour, and it was a complete bust. The only audience members were fans of the opening act. God bless them, they stayed, but there were no CD sales and no door money...and I dare say no new booking there in the near future...

I ended the weekend with an afternoon show at a Borders in Madison, where absolutely no one listened, and the same thing happened during the week when I played at a smaller cafe in Madison. I was beginning to think I had lost my ability to connect with people.

But then came the Twin Cities.

On Friday and Saturday nights, October 15 and 16, I played at Borders stores in Minnetonka and Richfield, respectively, both suburbs of Minneapolis. I didn't expect anything, and just wanted to get through them so I could spend the next five days relaxing.

...and here, at the risk of boring you with repetition, I'll say it again: The trick is to play through *all* the hard parts, and just don't stop. Because the Real Deal happens when you least expect it.

Both stores had baby grand pianos, so I figured, what the hell, I'd make good on the promise to myself earlier the month and use them. So I did. I opened the second set each night on the piano. The first night, in Minnetonka, the audience didn't really come to life until I played the piano, and they stuck with me through the remainder of the set, on my guitar. By the end of the night the cafe was full and everyone was listening.

The next night, in Richfield, was truly amazing. The weather outside had gotten cold, so people actually came out to hear the music. One guy, a folk music fan, had seen my name, researched me on the Internet, and knew all about me by the time I started playing. He and every member of the packed cafe listened to every song...laughed, cried, *paid attention*---I was, in other words, using all the tools I'd developed during those long, dreadful, uneventful shows to my advantage now, and it was an evening of pure delight, for me and the audience. I sold nine CDs that night and made a large number of new fans, including the Internet guy, who promised to give my name to every touring songwriter who he goes to see from now on.

So okay. So the ecstasy happened again. Took me by surprise again. Lesson taken, again.

***** *****

The next few days I relaxed a bit, and since I was staying in Faribault (about 40 miles south of the Twin Cities), I looked up Steve Cloutier and his wife Charlene (who Steve told me everyone calls "Shush"), who live there in town. I spent a good portion of Monday and Wednesday with them.

Steve is an extremely gifted artist. Not only is he one of the finest guitarists I've ever known personally, he's also a luthier who for a time ran a business selling his hand-made acoustic guitars to a who's-who of country and folk musicians, as well as just plain folks. He got out of the business a couple of years ago, but keeps his equipment and *may* (he tells me emphatically) build a few down the line if he can get enough orders at once.

I met Steve at the 1995 Napa Music Festival, where he and I were both finalists at its songwriting competition. The Internet has allowed us to stay in touch ever since, but this was the first time we actually saw each other since then. It was totally enjoyable. Steve is in the process of recording his second album, all on new digital equipment that he recently acquired. Since I'm thinking about getting the same equipment for my next project, I was thrilled to get a demonstration of it and how it works...pretty amazing stuff.

We also spent a lot of time in the living room of the Cloutier home, a beautifully restored and maintained house on a quiet street. Much of the interior carpentry has been built or restored by Steve, and I was amazed at how detailed and well-designed it all was. Steve, Shush and I just sort of hung out in the living room, talking about music, the music biz, and life in general. Looking up people like this and spending time with them is something I never did until I started spending time on the road...I suppose it's similar to the impulse that makes me call friends back home...the need for human contact. And you know what? Human contact is almost always *good*. What a shock.

On Wednesday night the Cloutiers invited me over for dinner. I had been concerned, because the day before I had been in bed all day with a terrible cold, which had come on suddenly and without warning. I spent most of the day on Tuesday sucking on Cold-Eeze lozenges, drinking fluids and not moving much. By Wednesday evening, at dinner with Steve and Shush, I felt almost totally better...I thought I had cheated another cold away...

No. Wrong. Uh-uh. Not correct.

The next few days were, by far, the hardest, most discouraging I have yet experienced in this journey.

I had what on paper looked to be a fun and profitable weekend booked up in Northern Michigan. I had Friday and Sunday shows in Traverse City, at the southern tip of Grand Traverse Bay, which extends off easternmost Lake Michigan. The middle day, Saturday, I had a show booked, as I did last year, at the Cedar Tavern in the small town of Cedar, about 20 miles northwest of Traverse City, on the small western peninsula of the bay. I had a nice motel at a cheap, off-season rate, right on the main road across the street from the water, where I could stay all three days. Perfect.

Except that now all that subconscious-wearing-thin stuff, all the days and nights of driving with little sleep, all the emotional letdown, followed by euphoria, followed by boredom, all of it caught up with me. As I drove through the Upper Peninsula of Michigan toward the Mackinac Bridge on Friday, I was convinced that I was over my cold...sure, my throat felt a bit raw, but nothing seemed particularly out of place and besides, I'd blow out whatever was left of the cold when I sang that night.

The weather had grown icy by the time I got to Traverse City. Wind whipped off the bay across from my motel, sometimes in 40-mph gusts. The wind chill was down into the low teens. Normally this wouldn't have bothered me all that much (I have a very practical, warm jacket for such weather), but as I unloaded the car the winds felt particularly nasty, offensive even. I wouldn't allow myself to imagine the truth---that I was actually feverish and that I was shivering from more than the wind.

I set up at Horizon Books in downtown Traverse City for an 8 p.m. show. Everything seemed fine until it was time to do a sound check. To my horror, what came out of my mouth was the most disturbing set of squeaks, blats and barks I've ever heard...whatever it was, it wasn't music. I couldn't sing any of my songs in their normal keys. I had laryngitis, and I was stuck. I did the entire show singing in a hoarse whisper, one-and-a-half to two full steps lower than normal. Thank God for capos!

I got back to my motel still convinced I was feeling okay and determined to "sleep off" this voice thing so that I could play the next night in Cedar, which was the last big money guarantee of this tour. It was a late and long scheduled show (9 p.m. to 1 a.m.), and I had to be in good voice to pull it off and get the big paycheck.

I woke up on Saturday morning to full-blown fever. I heard the wind outside and I shivered. I opened my mouth to hear what sort of sounds I could make...only to discover that *nothing* came out. Nothing but a pathetic bleat that sounded like pure death. I had totally lost my voice.

I was also totally out of provisions, most notably the grapefruit juice I had been relying on to keep the disease at bay. I knew I had to get to the grocery store soon or I wouldn't do it at all, I felt so bad. So I forced myself to dress, walked out into a wind storm that probably wasn't as dramatic as it felt in my condition, and drove to the nearest grocery store. While shopping I tried once again to use my voice, and something like the Voice of Hell quietly emitted from my lips. I could feel the congestion running from my throat down to my lungs, where it was now clear that I had a full-blown case of bronchitis.

I got back to the motel and drank half a gallon of grapefruit juice, took half a bottle of vitamin C pills, slept for a couple of hours, only to find that my voice had not improved one bit. I paced and paced my room. Never in all the years of performing have I ever canceled a scheduled show due to illness. "The Show Must Go On, You Loser!" shouted the Guilt Police from deep within. "You can't cancel this show! You need the money! Why else are you doing this? If you can't sing, why even be out on the road 2,000 miles from home?! Loser! Loser! Loser!"

It was the fever talking as much as my Catholic guilt, of course. But somewhere in there common sense prevailed. If I can't sing, I can't do the show.

So I called the Cedar Tavern and canceled that night's show.

"Loser!" shouted the Guilt Police.

"Loser!"

I spent the rest of the day Saturday sleeping and not using my voice. By the time Sunday rolled around, I was able to do the afternoon show at Borders in Traverse City about the same way I did the show on Friday---in a whisper and several keys lower than normal.

By the time I left Borders, the sun was out, all the clouds were gone, the wind had stopped and the temperature was in the 50s. My fever was slowly receding, and as it melted so did the Guilt Police. I was feeling almost normal again...but I was still reeling from the guilt I had let myself heap on my shoulders the day before...sure, the fever had caused most of it, but it was still a revelation I hope I can learn from rather than be afraid of.

I left while it was still dark on Monday morning, driving back over the Mackinac Bridge, up over into the U.P. of Michigan, then into Wisconsin. The bronchitis was still in my lungs. I still didn't have my full voice. But the fever was gone.

The moon was totally full, and as big as a giant, bright space ship in the early morning sky. By the time I reached the bridge, the sun was just rising. It was a stirring sight.

If you've never experienced the Mackinac Bridge, I highly recommend a trip to Upper Michigan so you can experience its majesty.

It's simply terrifying...and simply, ecstatically, beautiful. Four uninterrupted miles of expansion bridge, over the strait that separates Lake Michigan (to the west) and Lake Huron (to the east). High winds are almost always a danger, and high profile vehicles are usually escorted over for safety's sake. There is very little in the way of high walls or barriers on either side, so while it's a majestic view of the lakes, it's also extremely dangerous.

The early morning ride over that bridge on Monday was just what I needed. It snapped me back into the rawness of this adventure, and re-awakened me to the inspired lunacy that brought me into that moment. By the time I arrived in Wisconsin later in the day, the Guilt Police had been decommissioned.

Today I drove to River Falls, where I will play a show tomorrow night, and did a live radio show with Derek Anderson at WRFW-FM (*derek.j.anderson@uwrf.edu*), who had me on for a full two hours. We talked, Derek played CDs, and yes, I sang some songs. And what do you know, my voice was back...still cracking a little, but back, in all the right keys. Relief!

So tomorrow I'll check out of here at noon, spend the day at a café somewhere doing day job work on the computer, taking a walk or two, then playing my show at night in River Falls. Right after the show I'll do another crazy drive straight to Detroit.

My lungs and my head are still full of goo from the cold, and I'll probably be draining for another week. I will sleep a lot tonight, and hopefully the last vestiges of whatever it was that knocked me down last weekend will finally abate. If I have a relapse, I will be very pissed. I have been taking very good care of myself, overall, and I will *not* tolerate any damn virus screwing with my career. Or with anything else for that matter.

So there.

As expected, the Yankees won. They are champs. Again. They are the bronchial virus of baseball. I can accept them winning every now and then. As long as they leave me alone most of the time.

Sleepy-bye.

Goodnight.

NINETEEN
Reruns and Practicalities

Wednesday
November 17, 1999
Fort Bragg, California
11:32 p.m.
Tripometer: 17,006 miles

***** *****

The other night as I was trying to fall asleep I was glancing at my Rand McNally Road Atlas, and instead of counting sheep I decided to count the number of states I've visited this year.

To my astonishment, I determined that since the end of March I have either played in, or at least driven through, 47 of the 48 contiguous United States. Somehow I managed to miss South Dakota and the District of Columbia...I must make a mental note to ask the Booking Director how this happened...except the Booking Director is not in the mood for criticism these days.

***** *****

I concluded my mid-autumn visit to Wisconsin on October 28 with a performance at Java Hut (contact Gary Pedersen at 715-426-5800) in the small college town of River Falls, which is just about ten miles from the Minnesota line as the crow flies. River Falls also serves as a bedroom community for the Twin Cities, and its population consists of a nice mix of post-suburban families and college kids. The Java Hut show went well enough, although the audience was small. One highlight--a guy who had seen me at the Borders store in Richfield Minnesota a couple of weeks earlier drove over to hear me, and that alone was worth the effort.

I left immediately from River Falls and drove all night to Dearborn Michigan, where, as I had last year, I played at the Borders outlet there. It was a nutty drive, but I made it all the way to Dearborn wide awake with zero sleep-bombage. Unbelievable.

On Saturday October 30 I left Dearborn and drove straight through to Billings Montana, a journey of about 1,500 miles. I slept a total of four hours the entire way and arrived at my friend Phill the Doctor's place in just over 30 hours' time. Even more unbelievable.

From that point forward, right up to now, this tour has felt like a rerun from last year.

***** *****

I'm playing just about exactly the same venues, and staying at just about exactly the same places, heading for the exact same finale as one year ago. This is not a complaint. Somehow knowing where everything is, and seeing the end of the tour, has made me calmer...on the one hand.

On the other hand, the end of this trip has brought about a flood of questions and resolutions; a natural conclusion (perhaps) to a year of incredibly intense self-examination, so far away from home and so very, very solitary.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

My visit in Billings with Phill the Doctor and Donna the Nurse, who I told you about last year, was every bit as restful as last time around. Their dog Dally, who was raised as a cow-herder, guarded me everywhere I went, even sleeping by my bed to make sure that I wouldn't get lost. Donna tells me that Dally does this with every guest who stays with them; if there's more than one person, and they stay in different rooms, the poor animal goes nuts trying to figure out how to herd them together! But since it was just me visiting, she was happy as a clam, as long as I wasn't out of her sight.

I didn't have any shows in Billings this year, so after a couple of days I headed back to the West Coast, arriving in Tacoma at the same Motel 6 where I stayed last year. I played at a Borders store in Tukwilla (just south of Seattle---contact Jen Davies at 206-575-0444) on Thursday November 4, where I did very well selling CDs.

Friday and Saturday I did the rerun thing, playing up at the Cookie Café in Bellingham on Friday, then up to Port Townsend for an *extremely* good night at the Public House on Saturday.

I then left Tacoma and, like last year, drove south to Corvallis Oregon, where I spent a week with my friend Mike, who unfortunately managed to get the same bad case of bronchial gunk in his system that I (and a lot of other people, evidently) had caught. I was just recovering from mine; Mike was just coming down with his. I must say he was a very good sport the entire week, especially in light of the fact that I took over his entire kitchen with my computer and boxes of work, something which had to be annoying in his awful state...but he never complained.

I had originally been scheduled to play shows on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, then two shows on Saturday, all in Eugene or Corvallis. About two weeks before I arrived in the area, though, I got a phone message from one of the places (the one I was supposed to play on Wednesday) that it had gone out of business and there would be no show there. So overall I've lost three (that I can think of) shows this year...one due to a thoughtless club owner, one due to illness (mine), and one due to economics. Not too bad, really, considering the number of shows I've booked over the course of the past 12 months.

On Thursday I played at a very cool bar in Eugene called Hagen's (contact the owner, Alan Hagen, at 541-343-8108), which has a kick-ass sound system and a staff of some of the nicest people around. It was open mic night, and I was the featured artist. I hung out for awhile and generally had a marvelous time...and a free meal.

Friday night's show was at the New Morning Bakery in Corvallis (contact Dave Feinberg at 541-453-4971---Dave books for a number of venues in the area). A very decent guarantee and a large room with a responsive audience ("responsive" meaning they bought CDs).

Saturday I was back in rerun mode, joined by my friend Mike (now feeling much better after getting the appropriate prescriptions from his doctor) in Eugene all day. First (like last year) I appeared on Frank Gosar's Saturday morning folk program on KLCC-FM...next (like last year) we rushed over to The Beanery at 24th & Hilyard, where I played from 2 to 4 p.m.....after that (like last year) we hurried to the other side of town where I did another live radio spot, this one with Mike Myers on KRVM-FM. Unlike last year, my final show of the day was not down in the Corvallis area; instead Mike and I stayed in Eugene, had some dinner, then went over to Café Paradiso (call Greg Fleener at 541-349-8711) for the evening performance.

The club had booked an opening act for me, a singer/songwriter from Detroit named Jenn Cass. It was such a treat being able to spend some time with another road warrior, sharing a few stories and just generally

putting on a great show. For a crowded, noisy club, we managed to keep a good portion of the audience in front of the stage and paying attention.

And then it was down here to Fort Bragg, where tonight, like last year, I played at the Headlands Coffeehouse. Another worthwhile evening, and I played their piano (which I hadn't done last year), making it even better.

I now have four more shows scheduled in the next three days. On Sunday I'll be home. Again.

During these past eight months (seven of which I've spent on the road) there are some broad and sweeping and important conclusions I've come to about this land and this culture and the splendid beauty that it brings forth, all of which I'll try to talk about in my final post.

All of that, of course, is tied to how I perceive myself, and in that regard this has been a painful, though ultimately fulfilling year. I have encountered more challenges since coming home from my fall tour last year than in any of the twenty years that came before it. These challenges, from romance to finances to the basic questions surrounding what I do and why I do it, have, as a natural result of spending so much time alone, become (for lack of a better phrase) my constant companions, in the car as I drive, in bed with me as I try to sleep, on stage with me as I attempt to capture an audience.

Last year, on my final day in Tacoma, I wrote a post dealing with my relationship with food and how it affects me in my pursuit of my career. It was an important moment, talking about that part of my life so openly, because it really is a crucial part of understanding not only who I am, but the work I have to accomplish in the long run.

What I didn't realize, fully, back when I wrote that post, was how much my surroundings brought it on. The Motel 6 there in South Tacoma is completely encircled by the most tempting array of fast, fatty food I've ever seen in one location. Within walking distance from the motel is a Jack-in-the-Box, a Burger King, an IHOP, a Round Table Pizza and a steak house. Liberally availing myself of these establishments, I now believe, led to a moment of revelation which brought about the need to look at my eating habits directly and unflinchingly, and I used this sounding board to attempt to do so.

I have to admit now that it was only a start.

This year my stay at that same motel, surrounded by all that cholesterol, finally resulted in something close to a breakthrough, I think.

After a certain point the fact that I'm fat stopped bothering me the way it did when I was younger. As I grew more confident in the rest of my life, my physical appearance per se became less of an emotional burden. As a practical matter, of course, I have always known that being thin makes a better first impression when I'm onstage, though less so in the folk realm (where the music really does seem to matter more than the more superficial aspects of showbiz). Nevertheless, I had always set it as one of my "minor" goals to lose weight simply as a benefit to the way I appear while performing.

But I'm now 42 years old, and something I hadn't counted on has begun to happen--my weight is having a direct, negative effect on my health.

Eeeeeek.

When I gain weight, I acquire diabetes and high blood pressure. When I lose weight, they both go away. So when I gain weight, I take medication to control those maladies. So it has been for the past ten years or so. It has never been a big deal to me to just use the medicine when my eating gets out of control, and not worry about the long term health effects.

But this past year, as I've regained weight I'd lost a couple of years ago, certain physical maladies which I hadn't experienced before have made themselves evident, and without going into detail, let's just stipulate that none of them are acceptable, most of them are dangerous and all of them are fixable.

If I learn how to control my weight. For good.

So now it's not just a matter of practicalities; not just about how I look. It's about whether I live another 40 years or another 20 years (maybe).

Again: Eeeeeek.

I know how to diet and exercise properly. I know how to lose weight and even keep it off for a long period of time...but eventually, like so many others, something happens to restart those bad habits.

So then here I was, in Tacoma, confronted by the neon signs outside my room by the very thing that had been gnawing away at me more than any other these past few months, unable to sleep as my mind turned again and again, trying to figure out a solution.

I thought about how I had successfully beaten my alcoholism, how in just a month or so, on January 1, I'd reach my ten year sober anniversary. I had tried so many times before, but it never had worked. So why, this particular time, on January 1, 1990, did it stick?

And then I had it.

What happened on January 1, 1990 was that enough had happened to me, both in what I had seen in others and what I had done to myself, that I was *spiritually prepared* to take on the difficulty of facing the horrors I had masked with alcohol. And because I was spiritually prepared, I was able to be physically and mentally prepared when so challenged. And I was able to stay alcohol-free.

And there in Tacoma I stopped tossing in my bed as I realized that I am now on the verge of being spiritually prepared to deal with my health. I began formulating a plan. It's a personal plan and its details aren't important here, other than to emphatically state that at the very latest, my ten-year sober anniversary will also be the beginning of a life without the things that addict me to food. I believe I have the strength to pull it off. Like dealing with alcoholism, there will have to be a daily decision to engage in exercise, to refrain from harmful eating habits, to admit that I can't do it all by myself. It will be hard. But when I'm spiritually ready to take it on, I will succeed. And I think I'm there.

I am NOT Richard Simmons I am NOT Richard Simmons I am NOT Richard Simmons...

After I made that discovery, it felt like the floodgates opened, and every dilemma swirling around me over how to conduct my life as a touring singer/songwriter came crashing in on me...

---When and how will I write new songs?

---When and how will I acquire the new recording equipment I need to record the new songs?

---Do I want to tour all next year or just part of next year?

---Will I ever find a booking agent?

---Will I ever become totally financially stable at this?

..and then...

...the most important question was posed by my dear friend Norma, who I told you about last year. While staying with Mike in Corvallis, I drove down to Eugene on one of my nights off to visit her and Frank, with whom she has lived for the past several years. It turns out that Norma and Frank have hit tough times, and they spoke openly, in eloquent sadness, about their decision to part. This led to a discussion over what we each wanted in the form of life partnership...and Norma asked me directly a question I have been dodging a long time now:

---What is home?

Norma defined "home" as "someone to come home to...someone there." She may be right. I've thought a lot about it since, as well as all those other questions listed above.

I'll tell you what I think about it all in my final post next week, once I'm home.

Until then, stay away from all that Bronchial Madness out there.

TWENTY
The Beginning

Wednesday
November 24, 1999
Sierra Madre, California
9:44 p.m.
Final Tripometer for This Tour: 17,930 miles
Total Miles in 1999: 52,000
Total Miles Since Autumn 1998: 64,500

***** *****

When I was around twelve years old or so, Bill Medley of the Righteous Brothers went solo and released a single entitled "Peace Brother Peace," which if I recall correctly made only a moderate dent on the charts. It didn't matter to me, though. It was the greatest record I'd ever heard.

To be sure, I had already been consumed with popular music, beginning at around the age of nine. The Beatles, Aretha Franklin, Cream, even The Monkees-- I owned records by all of them and was immersed in them most of the time. But when "Peace Brother Peace" came out and I heard it for the first time, I was transported to new territory. It was my first experience where not just a song, but the performance of it, and the production of the record, moved me beyond any emotion I'd felt before.

The song was, no doubt, no more than a latter-day Tin Pan Alley attempt to cash in on the waning spirit of the 1960s, which were both literally and figuratively coming to an end at the time. But to me, an impressionable kid who loved pop music and was absolutely splitting at the seams with an almost painful desire to express myself, "Peace Brother Peace" was everything pent up inside me, fully exposed; it was as if someone had cut me open and taken everything that spilled out and put it into a hypodermic needle and injected it into Bill Medley...who then sang it on my record player, over and over again.

I recall that the song was one of the few at the time that came with a promotional film (which we'd now call a video), featuring Medley, in full Nehru-jacketed splendor, lip-synching the song with what seemed at the time to be the most intensity any human could muster. And the song itself, a gospel-style plea for peace and love and brotherhood, seared my soul with its pure, simple message. It was the first time I had really been moved by the raw, mind-bending *power* of a well-rendered performance and a musical artist in full control of that performance...it made me long to be such an artist.

I would stand in the middle of my bedroom, wearing a pair of cheap sunglasses, holding on to a flashlight, pretending it was a microphone, and sing along with that record until I grew hoarse. When the record hit its big, loud crescendo, I'd drop to my knees in front of my make-believe audience and sell the song with everything I had...and during its final strains, when it got quiet and hymn-like again, I'd bow my head as I imagined a spotlight slowly fading to a dark stage. Sometimes I'd start crying, I'd be so involved in the fantasy--which, of course, always ended with the crowd on its feet, cheering and shouting and crying right along with me...in complete harmony with the song and the way I'd sung it.

Sometimes I would perform my imaginary concert ten or more times in a row. I wore that record out after only a couple of months. There was nothing, nothing at all, that seemed as important or as *real* as being able to join, one-on-one, with an audience, to turn a song into an event, a powerful, lasting moment. What a gift to be able to do that!

And somewhere down the line I came to believe that I'd never be one of those performers, that I'd never have an effect on an audience the way Bill Medley had had on me...that I'd never be able to make someone feel that strongly with a simple song...how could I? It was, I convinced myself, an impossibility. So I stopped performing phantom concerts in my bedroom and became what most artists become...a cynic.

...and I came to believe that whatever success I'd ever find would be either ironic or by accident or both.

Times have changed. Times have changed.

The last three days of my autumn tour this year brought me full circle, back to the place where I started almost five years ago when I decided to pursue a career in music full-time. I had become weary and full of questions---all of which are just as important now as they were when I asked them---but the most important of them have been answered.

On Thursday November 18 I drove from Fort Bragg to Santa Rosa, where I spent a few hours with my friends Joe and Sandy and their two young daughters. That night I played at the Borders store in Santa Rosa (contact Suzanne Axtell at 707-569-0991), where I essentially played for Joe, Sandy and two of their friends. Afterward, as so often happens at these shows, several patrons who had been shopping approached and told me they had been listening. It was nice, but I was tired and ready to head home.

On Friday I played a double-bill with Paula Joy Welter in Placerville at the Placerville Coffee House (which I told you about last year). Before Paula arrived I did a telephone interview with Sonnie Brown, who hosts "The Minstrel Song Show" Saturday afternoons on KCBX-FM in San Luis Obispo. The interview was recorded for replay on Sonnie's program the next day, when I would be playing in SLO. It was a thoughtful discussion, and Sonnie's questions got me to open up about all the questions I've been asking myself lately. I was pleased that it would air just before I hit town, and felt that it was the best possible way to present myself on the radio to anyone who didn't know me.

Paula got to the club a couple hours early, so we went to dinner and had a great conversation about---guess what---the nature of performing on the road, how it affects our life decisions, and the basic question of "home."

The show in Placerville was lightly attended, but I sold three CDs and the fact that we had a great room to play in made the whole event very enjoyable.

It was time to spend my final day of this tour...then home...then....what?

Driving down to Half Moon Bay along the Pacific Coast Highway on Saturday morning, it was impossible to keep the miles and miles of road I had traveled this year out of my mind. It was all there, right there, just to my left, to the east, and it all was so *close*, so *near* to where I was at that moment...Bangor Maine...Miami Florida...Dearborn Michigan...New Orleans Louisiana...Omaha Nebraska...I glanced over at my road atlas, next to me on the passenger seat, and at a stop light opened it up to the national map.

I felt a rush of electricity pulse through me as I saw the entire country before me and *knew*--really *knew*--that every dot on that map was as close to me right then as any place I might lay my head, including the place I call home.

As I had so many times on this year's two tours, I was overcome by a sense of connectivity between my emotions, my yearnings, my desires, and those of everyone else I'd met along the way, and how interchangeable those feelings have become with the physical geography of the continent as I drive over and through it.

Our culture in America is in constant flux, to be sure. Politics weave in all directions over the course of time. Those who know me well are aware that I have strong opinions on such matters. But the more time I spend traveling, journeying to its every region and hearing over and over its many voices, the more I am convinced that at its core America is on a perpetual quest to be free, and to come to an understanding about what freedom really is.

No matter where I go or who I meet, I am confronted by this desire and its inherent struggles. Families are pulled and tested by it. Jobs are lost, found, given, taken, sometimes even voluntarily relinquished because of it. Our dreams are of perfect freedom, doing exactly what our instincts dictate. We seek love not just for security or emotional gratification, but for a soul mate who can create freedom from within and make real our most personal hopes.

And at the same time we insist on discipline, and function poorly without it. We are a culture of believers, for better or worse, whether it's a belief in God or just the individual's uniqueness; such faith makes us harsh taskmasters, because without the discipline to maintain our goals, no freedom can ever be reached. The interstate highways I drive on are themselves testament to a particular type of American discipline that gets things done because they need to be done, and which is not satisfied until complete. And, of course, once complete, those roads open up more possibility for freedom...

...and from that possibility comes the *desire* which makes everything run. We have allowed ourselves the awesome power to *hunger* for that which most moves our life force. We hunger for our own passions, certainly. But we also hunger for a better place, a freer place, a raw and wide-open place. It is a hunger that can be felt in the warmth of the sun glancing off a mesa in the Arizona desert; in the majesty of an immense body of water spanned by a practical sculpture of steel and concrete; in the eyes of a waitress in Baton Rouge which, without words, tell the world "I am more than you see;" in the shadows of both a skyscraper in Manhattan and the Montana Rockies as the sun sets behind them. It is all one.

If my plans hold, this is what I will begin to write about, and what I will explore, in my next batch of songs. I pray that the muse will strike soon. I think it will. I think I'm ready. For a lot of things.

Just like last year, the tour ended with two shows on Saturday. The first was at La Di Da in Half Moon Bay, where I arrived at around 9:30 a.m. At about 10:15 Tim Cupps, who plays bass, and John-Michael Kaye, who plays guitar, showed up to join me for both shows that day.

Oh baby it was good to play with a band again.

Lots of people showed up, and not just family and friends from Northern California (which there were plenty of). I felt tired, but we played well (with a few mistakes here and there, but hey, we hadn't rehearsed!) and the comments from those in the audience was very encouraging. One guy (who later told me he was there to break up with his girlfriend but decided to listen to us instead) even bought all three CDs I had for sale there. Afterward I was ready to drop, and I was beginning to dread going home to face all those questions that had popped up over this past year.

But then came San Luis Obispo.

In addition to the radio interview that played on Sonnie's program in the afternoon, the New Times Magazine in San Luis published a full-page interview with me which had been conducted by phone a few weeks earlier...I had not expected such a detailed version of the interview in print, nor did I expect the photos and other "FYI"-type stuff they added to the page. Put simply, I had in SLO on Saturday the kind of publicity that brings people to shows.

And they were there, all right.

Because of the advance publicity, the ownership at the club (Linnaea's Garden Cafe) removed the tables in the listening room and just set up rows of chairs in anticipation of a full house. This made me a bit nervous, as the last time they did that (two years ago) no one wanted to sit in the chairs, preferring instead to go outside to drink their coffee. Last year they kept the tables, and the room filled up, mostly with folks who'd seen me before in the SLO area, and as I mentioned last year, it was a very rewarding show.

This year, shortly after the room had been turned into a mini-auditorium, it began to fill. First in were some of the people who always come to hear me play in SLO, and their presence let me know right away that it would be a very good night. Especially nice was the presence of Leslie, my friend from Sierra Madre, who drove up to be in the audience on the final night of the tour, and Candace, who lives nearby but who had been on business in L.A. all day and drove straight from the airport to see the show. Other longtime SLO stalwarts included Sally and her husband (whose name I forgot that night and forget even now!!!) and Carol and Dave, who saw the second show I ever played in SLO back in 1995 and have been coming ever since whenever I'm in the area. There were many more familiar faces as well, and it was truly gratifying to see them all.

But then I noticed that the room was actually *filling up*, and eventually all of the seats were occupied...they even had to add a few extra seats...wow. The listening room was now completely full. The publicity had attracted new listeners.

We began the show at 8:30, and right at first there were some tuning problems. Instead of panicking, I thanked the audience and told them to mill about for five minutes while we straightened everything out...another lesson learned--the audience stayed right there and did just as I had asked...they remained calm because we did.

As we concluded the final song of the first set, I broke a string, but because I had John and Tim playing with me we just finished the song as if nothing was amiss. I thought we'd played a fairly mediocre set, but during the break I got my first indication that something special was happening when a couple of audience members walked up to me and told me how amazing we sounded...this was baffling to me, but I thanked them and proceeded to begin the second set.

From that point forward pure magic ruled the night. Every bit of work, every song sung in front of small or nonexistent audiences, or in pain or when tired or when ill, every single bit of experience I'd gained as a performer and honed without even knowing it--all of it flowed out of me that night, without my being aware of it.

Inspired by the consistently excellent playing of John and Tim, we began to feed off each other, and then the audience fed off of our energy, and the energy came back to us. I was calm, I was funny, I was serious...the audience sang along with the songs...there was laughter and tears and it all happened so effortlessly and naturally it was totally imperceptible as a phenomenon until it was over...

...and when we ended the audience wouldn't let us off the stage. The applause was not only loud, it was *heartfelt*, and I suddenly realized what had been happening...I understood the warmth coming from the crowd and I began to be moved...

...I sang a short, quiet song called "Desire," all by myself onstage, and suddenly every moment became precious. I heard and felt each phrase, each musical turn in the song, and was transported back to the moment it first sparked inside me, the moment I first played its chords, the emotion I felt when I first knew what that song would be about. It meant all that once again, and even more now, standing there with a perfectly silent, crowded room full of people intently hearing it, some with their eyes closed, some looking straight at me, all *listening*.

This was the moment for which all of the work is done. The shared experience of a song, the meaning of a brief moment of unexpected connection that is more than the performance, or the performer, or the song itself, but rather a joining of a roomful of disparate souls into one...briefly, briefly, but oh so *definitely*.

We closed with the band playing a song called "Angelenos," which is my love song to Los Angeles, a celebration of my return to Southern California and a fond ending to the best show I've ever been a part of.

And as I sang that last song of the night, I was suddenly, for the first time in over thirty years, back in my bedroom with that flashlight microphone, in front of an audience, delivering the message of music in the only way it matters--from the heart. And friends, it wasn't a fantasy.

It really happened.

As soon as we left the stage, most of the audience came up to us and said some amazing things. I sold enough CDs to actually pay Tim and John what they're worth (and what a great feeling *that* is!), and keep a large bit of cash for myself. The club manager, normally a quiet, poker-faced fellow, told me I was one of only a few artists that he personally invites back. This was high praise, but nothing compared to what happened next.

I looked over while shaking the hand of someone who'd just bought one of my CDs to see Carol (of Carol and Dave, the couple who always come to see me play in SLO) slowly approaching me. Both Carol and Dave have always been friendly, kind people, but I'd never spent more than a few minutes talking to them at any given show.

But now Carol came up to me, and I saw that she was shaking ever so slightly. Her arms were outstretched, her hands halfway clenched and facing each other, in a gesture that indicated she was having trouble saying what she wanted to say.

When the words left her lips, they stunned me with their power and meaning. They were simple. They were everything.

"You...are *important* to us," she said, ever so carefully. "You *mean* something to us." She then went on to say even more, the kind of stuff that I would say to Neil Young or Bob Dylan if I ever ran into them. And this kind and gentle woman was going out of her way to say these things to *me*. I made every effort to be as clear as I could so she could know how important it was that she told me those things, but I don't think any amount of human language could convey the gratitude or the humility or the joy I felt at that moment.

I had been given a gift. Right when I needed it, and not a moment sooner.

And now it was easy to see where I was at that moment, and where I needed to be in the next. I could start answering questions, all right, but not in any way I would have guessed even a week ago.

And so now those questions.

I have been moved by the response I've gotten from many of you as to how I (or you) might answer them. The overall consensus, it seems to me, was summed up by a message I got from Jim Savarino this morning. Jim basically boiled the questions down to not "when" or "if" queries, but rather "do I need" queries. In other words, shouldn't I reconsider the assumptions made in the questions and ask if I really *need* the things underlying the questions? A very good thing to ask. I think, though, that after a great deal of consideration, I'm confident that the underlying assumptions, if not cast in bedrock, are set in some fairly sturdy concrete...let's see.....

--When and how will I write new songs?

I will write them when they are ready to be written, and won't hammer myself with guilt if they don't get written in the next two hours. That being said, I have determined that after my five-month spring/summer tour next year, I will not tour in the fall. Instead I will stay home and record (and probably write a great deal of) my next album. To attempt to tour and create the album I want at the same time is unrealistic, and probably unhealthy. So I'll stay home during the second half of 2000.

---Do I want to tour all next year or just part of next year?

See the answer to Question Number One.

---Will I ever find a booking agent?

Yes. I will. It may take time, though, and I must be prepared for that. I realized just the other day that a great deal of my fatigue over the last few weeks is a result of being turned down by a booking agent who I had thought was *definitely* going to take me on. When that didn't happen, I became overwhelmed with the burden of continuing to work the business end of this endeavor, which takes up so much of my psychic energy. But God does provide, and the experience in SLO this past Saturday reminded me of the most important, basic fact: I *love* what I do. I could no more stop touring than I could stop breathing at this point in the game. I'm hooked. I'm addicted. In another month I'll be absolutely itching to get back out on the road, solitary and difficult and sometimes painful as it is. I'll just keep on doing what I do...the booking agent will arrive in due course.

---Will I ever become totally financially stable at this?

Again, yes, but not a simple yes. It's not only possible, but probable, that I'll be able to have enough financial success at songwriting and performing to, say, own a house and maybe have a few bucks in the bank, so long as I keep performing and keep putting out new music and remain vital as an artist. Persistence is the fuel of desire, in whatever aspect of life there is. So yes, I can reach a point where more of my shows are like the one in SLO this past Saturday than not. In which case I will be able to do music and nothing else. And you can call me nuts (and I know many of you do, with good reason), but the faith I've spoken about so often in these posts tells me time and time again that all I have to do is keep working, and without even realizing it I'll attain whatever success I want. That being said---and I can't say this strongly enough---I will continue to do this *not* for the stability but *only* because it makes me happy. So if I need other income to supplement that which I make as a musician, I will find and take it. As long as I can do what brings me fulfillment and allows me to be the best person I can be---to other people and to the world generally---I will proceed, regardless of the need to seek additional employment.

---What is home?

It is Sierra Madre, California. It is Southern California, where I was born, where I was raised. The place that is in my blood and soul. It is where my friends live. Where I am known and loved and cared for because of all of who I am, not just the parts that are seen over the span of a few hours or days.

But there is that other home, the home with someone waiting there, as Norma said last week, the home with walls filled not only with pictures and mirrors and windows, but with history and the kind of love built with specific loved ones through a specific kind of commitment...family. This is a home I do not have now.

I don't know if I'll ever have that other kind of home, not for sure, but I'm more than just a little confident it will happen...eventually. As for today, I can safely say that I don't want that other kind of home, not right now. I am driven, with the sweetest desire anybody could ever experience, to continue my journey pursuing a musical career, and I have no desire to look back or consider settling down. This could change overnight, of course, but unless and/or until it does change, I'm a touring singer/songwriter.

One more time, 'cause it reads so damn well:

I am a touring singer/songwriter.

And so I'm back at the beginning, which is where I always go when I return from the road. If there is one Big Truth left for me to learn in this lifetime, it's that nothing ends--not love, not work, certainly not a national tour--but rather everything leans forward to new beginnings, where we have the opportunity to consider the future by reviewing the past and, hopefully, remain in the moment.

This is the final post in this series of posts, which started so simply nearly 14 months ago. I'm sure I'll have a thing or two to say now and then, so you may hear from me once in awhile on this listserve. But for the most part, other than letting you know about my upcoming shows, I'm taking a break. It's time to focus on songwriting again.

...yes, and that was an admission. An admission that these posts have filled a need for me over the past year-and-a-half, one that I didn't know was there. That instead of writing songs maybe I needed to talk out loud about what I do so I could see in front of me all the questions I had about this life I've chosen, and all the joy I get from it. That this series of posts really was just me talking to myself, with you out there looking over my shoulder.

I appreciate the opportunity more than I will ever be able to say in words.

Thank you for your expressions of encouragement, of engagement, of challenge and friendship in response to these posts. I am grateful that Tom Ianniello asked me to send them and that, since nothing ends(!), we are all at the beginning again...and we'll communicate via some other means...I hope that all begins very soon.

And now let's all get back to it, shall we?

Love

Mark

Epilogue: Spring 2003

**UPDATE:
That Joyful Noise**

Hi gang.

The last time I posted a "note from the road" was November of 1999, the year I was away from home for 7 months. At the end of that post I came to several conclusions, the two biggest of which were that (1) I would never find a life companion while doing this and that (2) I am a touring singer/songwriter, and no matter what else exists in my life, that would always be true.

Well. God has a very refined sense of humor. The second of the two points certainly remains true, but the first...

Within two months of writing that I'd never find someone to share my life with, I was in love with, and knew I would propose marriage to, Melissa Morgan---and as many of you know, not only did I follow through with the proposal, but Melissa and I have been happily married for nearly two years. She is the center of my life, its balance and its core. More importantly, our marriage has given me clarity on many things, not the least of which is what the meaning of "home" is. I discovered, for the first time in my life, how important home is. And I found the most amazing person on the planet to make one with. I even wrote a song about it. You could look it up.

Through it all, I've continued touring. Melissa, God bless her, has always understood how important it is to me, even though some of the time apart was very difficult for both of us. In 2000 I was out for five-and-a-half straight months; in 2001 I toured in May, July and August.

Last year I finally released the CD I wanted to release since I started touring. It's called *The River Road*, and it is the culmination of all the experiences and emotions I had bottled up and tried (sometimes quite futilely) to convey in those twenty posts I sent to the Iguanaland and Exile lists in 1998 and 1999. It was like a huge weight had been lifted to have it out and completed, and in 2002 I toured four months in its support---May, July, September and November.

This year I toured in May, and that's it for the year. I'll be home tomorrow, and when I get there I have lots of plans---many involving the music biz---but none of them involving touring---not for another 18 months at least. Whether I'll continue to tour at all is now an open question for me. I suspect I'll never fully have it out of my system and I'll probably hit the road again at some point, but the fact that today I'm on my way home excited about doing something different than what I've been doing over the past nine years is, at minimum, a fact to ponder.

And pondering is what our mostly-humble leader, Tom ("Write or Else") Ianniello has been asking me to do lo these nearly four years since my last post. I figured I didn't have anything to say, so I evaded his entreaties (and numerous death threats) until now. And so with your indulgence (or a quick push on your delete button, a choice I'd totally understand), here's as brief an addendum as I can come up with to my previous posts. I'll be staying with Tom and Erika in Phoenix tonight before heading back to L.A. If Tom gets enough complaints about this I'm sure he'll tell me. In person. In a way only he can.

June 3, 2003
Fort Stockton, Texas
8:00 a.m. CDT
Tripometer: 11,677 miles

On the two southernmost major east-west Interstate highways, there are particular places where a line is crossed and a native Angeleno knows that home is just over the horizon; places where the landscape of Everywhere Else changes into the distinct quiet and infinite, indescribable scents of the desert. They are the places where the traveler, long away from Southern California, is suddenly smacked in the eyes, nose and throat with the unmistakable *crunch*, that electric *zap* which infuses the Southwest and has driven its history---that particular form of insanity which anyone from William Mulholland to Joan Didion to Bugsy Siegel could tell you is actually supreme Sanity; that thing which makes the Southwest, and L.A. in particular, what it is and strictly defines, without uttering a sound, what it isn't.

When heading west on I-40 the first place you feel it is in New Mexico, not far from the Texas line. On I-10, that place is here, in Pecos County, where the humidity and dense grasslands of East Texas are suddenly gone, turned to raw, dry heat and tumbleweeds. It clobbered me as I got out of the car here yesterday afternoon---and I knew this trip was really ending.

Last night for dinner I ate the most remarkably cholesterol-laden meal I've ever had in my life. Next door to the motel where I'm staying is a barbecue joint called The Camp House, where customers are required to first walk in to a huge covered patio filled with wood barbecue pits jammed with chicken, pork chops, pork ribs, beef ribs, sausage and several other smoked meats which I can't even remember because my mind is still boggled. The customer chooses whatever meat(s) he or she wants, and it is sold by the pound. The meat is then taken into the next room (where the customer is also asked to go), where sides such as potato salad and corn on the cob may be chosen. I chose a pork chop the size of a small child, which was dipped in homemade barbecue sauce the Lord Himself could not have improved upon. I chose some potato salad, which was totally unnecessary, because the chop, which I shouldn't have eaten all of, but I did, was just so amazing. It may not be true that everything in Texas is larger than life, but in these parts it's not only true, it's the only way anyone knows how to do anything.

After my meal I took off my shirt and examined the scar on my back and side. All seemed to be either healing or completely healed. I'll stare at that scar every time I look in the mirror. I think it was put there for a reason. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

First, I suppose I should cover some of the major changes which have occurred since the last time I described my life on the road. For the most part, the way I pack and the way I plan everything remain the same. But there are a few things which are different:

---*Venues*. I play less Borders. Hardly any, actually. As I hoped would happen, the availability of better, more listener-friendly venues opened up the longer I stayed on the road. Significantly, the corporate structure of Borders changed, and their booking policies became far less community-oriented. A couple of years ago most of the new regional managers stopped paying for musical acts, and that made the decision to stay away from Borders much easier. There are still a few places where I can get paid to play Borders (this past month out of 17 live shows I played 4 Borders, all in New Jersey, because the manager who books those stores knows me and invited me to play---for a very fair wage). These venues, as I suspected they would, grew tiresome over time. After you've played for some real audiences, the "hit and miss" vibe of a bookstore is far less appealing. House concerts are my favorite venues, as the audiences are so receptive, they build name recognition and the money is usually good. Folk clubs and coffeehouses are good if they are on the main folk circuit; others are sometimes very lackluster. But the people are always great. The one thing I still haven't got that I really need is a booking agent. Without one, getting into the larger venues is almost (although not completely) impossible. Over the past four years I've managed to get myself booked at a few major folk clubs and/or get myself in front of some very good and/or influential audiences. But because my name recognition is still so low, getting beyond that point and getting consistent, quality bookings---bookings at places where I will get noticed and create buzz---remains elusive.

---*Lodging*. I discovered Priceline. Forget anything you hear about Priceline in their ads, and forget any experience you've had with Priceline in buying airline tickets. I have discovered that careful manipulation of the Priceline site can net 3- or 4-star hotel rooms at prices far lower than chain motels. Last July I played all over Florida, and I used Fort Lauderdale as my "base camp." I stayed 21 days at the Sheraton in Fort Lauderdale for \$35 per night. I have stayed in Hiltons and Crowne Plazas and Sheratons all over the country for as low as \$30 per night. There are many tricks to manipulating the site, and it requires some planning and some intestinal fortitude, but trust me---staying at a nice hotel for thirty or forty dollars less per night than it would cost to stay at a Motel 6 or Super 8 is well worth the trouble. My methods are fairly boring and lengthy to explain, so I'll leave them out here. But if anyone wants to know how I do it, send me a private e-mail and I'll tell y'all about it.

---*Food*. Holy shit. Food. Still the Big Deal (reference the pork chop, above). But the one thing I did do was give up eating candy, cakes and any other sweets made with sugar. I'll eat sugar-free sweets, but for the most part all the sugar free food available out there tastes just awful. So I don't eat candy bars or Twinkies on those long all-night (or all-day) drives anymore. Instead of trying to stay awake, I...

---*Sleep*. That's right. No more dodging Sleep Bombs. I have perfected a method of keeping alert by immediately---and I mean *immediately*---stopping when I feel the first hint of sleep deprivation. I don't wait for a rest area. I'll pull over into a Dairy Queen or a convenience store parking lot, leave the engine running and the air conditioning on (with the vent open so that fresh air is getting in), grab a pillow from the back, put my head down and crash. I usually don't sleep for any longer than 20 minutes, but the re-fueling I get from a short nap like that lasts for a very long time, and it's much safer than trying to stay awake. Much more boring, true. But overall, a better idea.

--*Communication*. It seems strange to say this now, but I would never have thought to get a cell phone if Melissa hadn't insisted I get one prior to my 2001 trips. Now I simply don't know what I'd do without the damn thing. I can be reached virtually anywhere, which makes doing the day job I maintain out here on the road all the more easy. All my calls are forwarded to the cell phone (even if someone at the office dials my extension, the call comes through to the cell). It's amazing and an incredible blessing, and not just for business (day job and music), but to keep in touch with friends and especially Melissa, from anywhere, no matter where I might be driving. I'm like a little kid with a new toy, and that feeling hasn't changed since I first got it.

--*Performance*. Playing live now is like drinking water. I am now the best I can be as a performer at this level. New challenges (i.e. playing for larger audiences with higher expectations) will make me better, but until and unless I can find those challenges, for the venues I'm playing I am a finely-tuned performance machine. Ooooh, that last sentence looked silly and fairly pompous...I didn't intend it to be. But the truth is, after nine straight years of touring, playing in front of an audience is now purely about the show I'm doing at the moment and never about self-consciousness or worrying about my performance. It happened as a natural phenomenon, just like it would happen to anyone. That said, it's just amazing to feel so confident and totally comfortable onstage, all the time.

There's one other aspect that's more difficult to describe, and that's the feeling, after many thousands of miles of travel back and forth across the Continental United States, that the entire country is my *neighborhood*. I can navigate through just about any part of the country now, feeling that I know it; that I know where I am and that I've not only been there before, but that I belong there. Quite a feeling. And unexpected.

But then so many unexpected things keep happening...

I've been over this before, so I won't belabor it here--suffice it to say that I have never really spent a lot of time taking good care of my body. I've gone through phases where I've paid attention for awhile, lost weight, exercised, etc., but eventually I have reverted to old habits. As a result I have had to deal with diabetes (completely related to my weight) and other maladies associated with it. When I was in my early thirties I contracted--twice in three years--a disease called cellulitis. I'm no doctor, but if you want to know exactly what it is, here's a link: www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000855.htm

Simply put, Cellulitis is a bacteriological skin infection caused by staph or strep germs which get under the skin through cuts or insect bites. It essentially becomes gangrene--while the body is still alive. It usually attacks the feet or face, but can happen anywhere on the body. It is one of the reasons that people with diabetes are often required to have their feet amputated. The disease is one nasty motherfucker, killing not only the skin, but the bones and the muscles and everything it touches. It'll kill you if it goes untreated. And it can spread very quickly.

The first two times I had Cellulitis it was on my feet. It got in the first time via a spider bite, and the second time through a cut. The second time I got it I almost lost my feet, but both times--because of my relative youth, mostly--strong antibiotics fought it off. My skin is still discolored around my feet to this day. But by God, since that time if I get even a scrape down around my legs or feet, I rub it with enough isopropyl alcohol or hydrogen peroxide to sink a ship. I haven't had a recurrence in 14 years.

Not on my feet, anyway.

On Thursday May 8 I got back to my hotel in Rochester, New York after playing a show two hours away in Ithaca. When I took off my shirt I felt a little itch on the right side of my back, and with my right hand I was just able to reach it--it was a zit. A pimple. And, not to put too fine a point on it, I popped it. Like I'd popped thousands of other zits over the course of my life. But this time I evidently let in a nasty little bug.

The next night I once again played a show in Ithaca, this time at a rather famous vegetarian restaurant called the Moosewood Café (www.moosewoodcafe.com), a very hip little place where I had a very good time. When I got back to Rochester I felt the zit on my back, only now it hurt. I tried to pop it again to relieve the pressure, but nothing happened. I decided to just let it go away on its own.

On Saturday I awoke from an afternoon nap feeling mildly feverish. I thought I was coming down with a cold. I played a house concert for the Golden Link Folk Society in Rochester (www.goldenlink.org) and had a fabulous time. But by the end of the evening, during the ensuing song circle, I was beginning to feel very feverish and very weak. I left and returned to my hotel, immediately going to bed. The next day I had a 600-mile drive to Chicago, where I was to stay the night on my way to Iowa, where I had a live, hour-long radio concert to do on Monday May 12. I awoke Sunday morning fully engulfed in a fever. I was convinced that I had either suffered food poisoning or I had contracted some sort of flu. The zit on my back still hurt, and that made the illness even more annoying. Trouble is, I was so feverish I didn't notice that the pain from the zit was spreading.

I got to Chicago and went immediately to bed, not eating anything. In the middle of the night I awoke with violent vomiting and diarrhea. Uncontrollable. Awful. I was getting worried.

Now totally shivering with cold flashes, unable to keep any food down but undaunted (the fever made me deliriously confident that I was going to be okay), I drove on Monday to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where I checked in to my hotel with enough time to take a nap before heading up to Cedar Falls, about an hour away, where the radio station was. As I took off my shirt, I looked in the mirror for the first time since all of this started, and noticed that there was a bright pink patch running from the zit on my back around to my right side. It was raised. It was hot. That's weird, I thought. I wonder if that has anything to do with...

...and as I sank into bed, right at the moment before I fell asleep, it hit me. These are the same symptoms I experienced when I had cellulitis all those years ago...but could it really happen on my back? I drifted off to sleep, and the alarm clock woke me up a couple of hours later.

I struggled to get dressed, but managed to make myself presentable. I got down to the car and started to drive to Cedar Falls. I called Melissa from my cell phone and told her that I thought I had cellulitis...this did not, as you might imagine, make her happy. She kept it together as best she could, and as I drove up to Cedar Falls she called my HMO and found out their emergency room policy (thankfully, they have one). I promised her that as soon as the radio concert was over, I'd drive back to Cedar Rapids, put my guitar back in my room and find an emergency room to get treatment.

Not long after I arrived at the studios of KUNI (www.kuniradio.org) for the live broadcast of "Live From Studio One," I realized that I would not make it back to Cedar Rapids. The entire staff and crew at the station were mortified to see me in my condition, but I assured them I'd get through the show if they could just tell me where the nearest hospital was. Thankfully, there was one about five minutes away.

I somehow managed to get through the live concert (I think I did okay, but not so okay that I'd play it for anyone, but then again I'm too afraid to listen to the aircheck myself to know for certain), ran down to the parking lot (where I promptly ralphed all over the asphalt), drove to the emergency room and waited for treatment.

I highly recommend Iowan emergency rooms. Not crowded. Everyone treated me like a human being. Three different people treated me, including a doc who was just as friendly as he could be. He took one look at the infection and told me that my diagnosis was correct. I asked him if I needed to cancel the rest of my tour. He said no, just to take it easy as much as possible and take the giant horse pills he prescribed. He gave me a shot of some powerful antibiotics (right into the muscle of my leg---ouch!) and sent me on my way. The next day I filled the prescription for the horse pills (an antibiotic called Augmentin) and proceeded to take two of them a day for the next ten days.

I did my remaining shows in Iowa that week and gradually got my appetite back. Meanwhile, back home Melissa was just shy of freaking out---and who could blame her? Here I was, 2,000 miles away with a deadly illness and all she had was my reassurance over the phone that I was going to be okay. That certainly wouldn't have made *me* feel any better. Fortunately, the following weekend Melissa flew out to see me in Kentucky, where I was doing a house concert and a live show (we had planned on the visit before I'd left on the trip), and it was a good thing. Being able to see the infection and see that it was getting better made her feel much more relieved.

I have to say that while Melissa was understandably upset, for me it was the greatest of comforts having her there back home, caring. Just a few years ago I would have been very much alone, far away from friends and family, with no one to comfort me or to talk to during the scariest part of the experience. This is all part of that "home" thing I spoke of earlier. Knowing she was there---that there was someone at home waiting and worrying---made me heal faster, I'm certain.

There is much irony in that if I hadn't had cellulitis before, I would not have known what it was and I would surely have avoided going to the doctor until it was too late. I would have ended up in the hospital at best had I not recognized the symptoms for what they were...and yes, I'll say it, I could have even died. Jesus that looks creepy in print.

...but not as creepy as looking at it, every day, even as it heals and leaves its permanent mark on my back and side. I'm not much for believing in signs, but this is definitely a marker, a reminder---maybe even a guidepost.

I have always been realistic about what I expect to get from this journey. As time has gone on and as I have improved as a performer, I have also become even more "realistic," if that's possible. The truth about this lifestyle is that success in the performing songwriter world is, perhaps more than any other, subject purely to the definition of success the individual places on it. I have, and will continue, to define the biggest part of my success as the ability to play for audiences all over the country, no matter how much money I make. But it would be dishonest not to admit that I also have a more tangible goal--to make a permanent living as a touring singer/songwriter, and that goal has been more elusive than I had originally planned or hoped for. Good reviews for my CDs, an accumulation of fans all over the country---all of these things have been greater blessings than I could ever possibly describe---and they are also only part of what I set out to accomplish.

I see clearly now, more than ever, that there is no set way to become a full-time, making-a-living-at-it performing songwriter. But I do think that to arrive at that place by touring requires being out on the road essentially all of the time. The most (financially) successful people I know in this business are never really home. They are wanderers, and they remain wanderers even after they begin to put money in the bank.

Hard truth: I am not a wanderer. I am a traveler. But I require a home. Now that I have one, I want to preserve it and nurture it.

And so even as I have plotted my travels more and more carefully and expertly, even as I have continued to improve as a songwriter and as a performer, even as my name has become more recognized in the "folk world," I have come to the realization that the reason I haven't gotten a booking agent, the reason I haven't made more inroads into a better-paying career in music, is that I haven't committed to the road permanently. And when I realized I hadn't done that, the followup realization was that I didn't want to embrace the road as my constant companion. I want to tour four months or so every year, yes. But I am not the kind of person who could ever marry the road. Marrying Melissa has made me understand even more than I did before that I have a need for a permanent place. And that realization, naturally, has led to many long nights of pondering about what it is I really want to do with my music as the next five years or so unfold.

I have been given the greatest of all gifts by the people for whom I work at my "day job," which is so much more than that. It is a job provided by a group of people who support me and my music in a way that defies any sort of logic, and I owe them so much more than simply my work or my loyalty. They give me the opportunity to live two professional lives---one as a paralegal and one as a touring songwriter. I will never take that for granted, and want to continue to use this gift they have given me to the best extent possible.

But what is the best way?

Over the past couple of years, Melissa and I have talked about buying a house the same way we talked about taking a rocket ship to the moon---it seemed a complete impossibility. We were certain that our credit---and the many bills I brought into the marriage---would make it impossible. But slowly something happened. We took an actual inventory of our bills and began to see that with some work they could be paid off. And then we met with a mortgage broker, who ran our credit and, to our amazement, we learned that it wasn't really that bad at all. At that point owning a home became somewhat of an obsession.

A plan emerged, and that plan is the reason I'm only touring one month this year. I am going home to work my ass off for a year. I will find and work a second job, using the extra money to pay off debts. Working 16-plus hours a day will no doubt be tiring, but I figure it can't be any more tiring than what I do on the road. And by next spring, we hope that our financial situation will be such that we can actually start looking to buy a house. After that, I'll start thinking about whether I'll go out on the road again, either in late 2004 or in early 2005.

But in the meantime I decided to keep my hand in the folk world by getting involved in the North American Folk Alliance, which has its annual conference in San Diego in February of 2004. I am going in with two other people to go full-tilt into this massive networking vortex, and the remainder of 2003 will find me not only working two jobs, but also knee-deep in making contacts for the conference. We will be running a booth on the floor of the conference and we will also be running a performance room at the hotel, where we will try to present the best possible folk acts we can find. To do this will involve a massive amount of work over the next 9 months, and in the process I will finally meet (and do the "schmooze thing" with) many movers and shakers in the folk world. This way, it is hoped, when I am finally ready to go back out, I will have met some people who can actually help me get to where I want to go next. I will be very busy. And hopefully along the way a few more things might become clear...or clearer, anyway.

And that brings me to this, the scariest and the most exciting truth: At this precise moment in time, for the first time in a decade, I can honestly say that I don't know what I will be doing two years from now. I could very well be out touring again, hopefully playing much more rewarding and financially profitable gigs. But I could also be doing something else. There are many things I have wanted to do, and even though I will be working a lot and planning for Folk Alliance a lot, I may try my hand at some of those other things as well to see what happens.

And that scar on my side will, I hope, act as a reminder that I need to protect my body. I am almost 46 years old, and there is not much time left to turn the corner and preserve my health. Staying in one place for awhile will give me the opportunity to figure out just how to permanently live a healthy physical life, not just an active spiritual and emotional life.

I have a partner now, someone who is so much more than beautiful, so much more than a friend or a lover. She and I each have our individual dreams and goals, and each of us is stronger, not just because the other is there to support the other but because we also have shared goals, things we want to have together. It probably seems like no big thing to those of you who've been married for awhile--but for two people like Melissa and me, who are fiercely independent beings, the knowledge that we have a real, eternal partnership is incredibly exciting. She and I remain on our own journeys, but we now each have somewhere permanent to call home. This changes everything. In huge and sometimes invisible ways. But everything is filled with possibility now.

The most important thing I know about my own journey is that even though that feeling of imminent change is swirling around me, I am never going to stop striving for the Prize, however that term becomes re-defined over time. I am convinced that doing things, taking chances, being unafraid to jump into the unknown, will save and preserve me always.

And no matter what else happens I also remain, forever, a touring songwriter. I will always write and play music. Maybe you'll see me on TV one day. Maybe you'll hear about me playing at a folk festival somewhere. Maybe you'll just hear me play in your living room. But I have staked out and earned my claim. And that will never fade away.

At 3:00 a.m. in Fayetteville, North Carolina it is almost ridiculous to say that the world is asleep. The world at that hour, in that place, is truly almost gone--vanished. As a light wind blew the humid air around me in the darkness last Thursday morning, I loaded the car and headed out onto Interstate 95 for a 700-plus mile southbound drive down to Homestead, Florida, for one show, that night.

I had agreed to open the regular Thursday night show at the Main Street Cafe (www.mainstreetcafe.net) because the owner, Laurie Oudin, had invited me back after I'd played a songwriter circle there the year before. The Main Street's Thursday night "Up Close and Personal" concert series attracts all the big names in folk music. The club has a great stage and an amazing sound system, and the place fills up for the Thursday night shows. In short, this was going to be a great opportunity to introduce my name to a quality folk audience, get a percentage of the door and, hopefully, sell some CDs.

It was a long day's drive, through some heavy, hot rain and occasional laser-bright sunshine. By the time I arrived in Homestead (at the far south end of the Florida Peninsula), I was ready to drop. This was the next-to-last show on the tour and I was just simply exhausted. In the month of May I played 17 live shows, three radio interviews and the one live radio concert--and hadn't missed any of them, even through that horrible week in Iowa with a deadly pink skin infection snaking its way around me...and now I was looking forward to playing the best club on the tour, in front of a great audience, after which I'd drive up to Georgia to do one more show and go home. Nice way to end it.

I called Laurie from the motel phone. It was five p.m. She told me to get there at 6:30 for a sound check. Okay, so I wouldn't get to take a nap...that's fine....and then I asked about the details.

Now here is where it's important to stress that even the most anal-retentive person can let things slip through the cracks when that same person is the performer, the travel agent and the booking agent. In a perfect example of why I need to get a booking agent, I realized as Laurie spoke that I had never fleshed out any details on my appearance there with her, and never put anything in writing. This is Death to a touring performer. Always have the details in writing. And I had goofed up. On the one show I was most looking forward to.

Laurie informed me that I would be doing four---FOUR---songs to open the show. When I expressed surprise at this, she said that she was sure she'd confirmed that with me and that I'd approved it...but there was nothing. She had nothing, I had nothing.

Do not misunderstand---Laurie is a fantastic person and I highly---*highly*---recommend her place as a venue. It is *not* her responsibility to make sure all the details are straight. It is the responsibility of the artist or the artist's agent to do that. And the artist's agent---me---had failed.

So there I was, exhausted after driving for 14 hours through some hellacious weather, hot, sticky, and cranky to begin with, and now I was being told that I had done all that to play four fucking songs. And a straight fee of \$50. How the hell was I going to make an impression with just four stinking songs? How was I going to sell any CDs? How was anyone in that audience going to remember me?

For the first time ever, I actually felt sorry enough for myself that I started crying. It was mostly, I think, the knowledge that this was the penultimate road concert for many months to come, and it had turned into a disaster. I showered, dressed, and just seconds before I opened the door of the motel room---again, God has that exquisite sense of humor---a tropical torrent began pelting the parking lot. Naturally, I had left my umbrella in the car. I had no choice but to get soaked on my short, 10-foot jaunt to my waiting Oldsmobile Alero.

I arrived at the club, and the headliner took one hour and fifteen minutes to get his sound check done. I went outside and called Melissa on the cell phone...I told her that I was soooooo ready to come home....and damned if I didn't start crying again.

Then something inside of me that I had never come in contact with before emerged in my psyche and whacked me upside the head. The best way to put it is that it was the Professional inside of me that I hadn't even realized was there. Somehow, over time, a hard-bitten, shut-the-fuck-up-and-play persona had been born deep inside of me, and I hadn't even realized he was lurking there. Until I needed him. I suddenly didn't want to cry anymore. I could feel it happening even as I spoke with Melissa. I told her that I needed to go inside, and I did. When it was time to sound check, it took me about 90 seconds. I was ready. I was dry-eyed. I was in the Zone.

When I was introduced I took the stage and I played my four songs. I engaged the audience. They laughed. They listened. They applauded more loudly than any audience I've ever played in front of. I knocked my little four-song set out of the ball park.

Without telling me, the sound guy had recorded a CDR off the board. As he handed it to me as I walked offstage, he told me that my songs were "fantastic." This from someone who gets to hear the cream of the singer/songwriter crop every week.

I sold two CDs immediately. If I wasn't so tired I would have sold more at the end of the night. But the Professional told me that I needed sleep, that I had nothing more to prove, to anyone. Laurie invited me back any time I wanted to come, and I left a completely different person than when I had arrived. Not cold, but calm. Not arrogant, but confident. About halfway back to the motel I realized that I had become that person a long time before that night. And I smiled.

I've listened to that CDR the sound guy at the Main Street Cafe gave me a couple of times now. It's an excellent recording, and I'll probably use it as a demo for future bookings. The first time I played it I felt like I was hearing myself for the first time. I hadn't listened to a live recording of one of my performances for several years, because I always found something that made me cringe, something that I needed to work on. Not this time. As I listened to the CDR I heard someone who had become a whole, complete performer and artist. Is that really me? Yes, brother, yes. You bet your ass it is. Now shut up and drive. We're going home.

And so that's it. No matter what comes Next, whether it's back on stage at a folk club, whether it's making that damn talk radio demo I've been wanting to do for so many years, whether it's becoming a professional booking agent for other artists--no matter what--I have one more important weapon in my arsenal. The Professional. If this ever was a game, it isn't a game anymore. It's real and it's more fun and scary and invigorating than it's ever been before. What's "it"? It's whatever I choose to do, and it's what I am all the time. And it is the culmination of all the travel, all the work, all the heartache, all the long nights, all the songs, all the confrontations, all the sights and sounds of this magnificent country--all the love. It is the Joyful Noise of a soul totally fulfilled and completely, unendingly, thirsty.

What's next? Let's see. For now I'm heading home to the most beautiful woman in the world, to begin whatever Next is. For me, for her, for us. Hold on baby. I'm almost there.

Love to everyone,
Mark



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Humphreys was born in Pasadena California in August 1957. He thought he'd go into acting until he found out what chords are, at which point he stopped hanging around actors, rented a piano and decided he'd become the next Elton John. In the 1980s he changed his mind, deciding to become the next Elvis Costello, whereupon he bought an electric guitar and played in several rock bands in Los Angeles. When that didn't pan out he gave up music for lots and lots of beer. Finally he decided to get therapy, quit drinking, buy an acoustic guitar and become the next Neil Young (without Crazy Horse). He's been quite happy ever since. He currently resides in the L.A. suburb of Van Nuys, with his wife Melissa ("Karen" in Chapter Seventeen), with whom he got seriously involved just about a month after he wrote what became Chapter Twenty of this book. In the spring of 2005 he made his final national tour, returning home to pursue becoming the next Paul Harvey. He continues to run Trough Records, an independent label featuring singer/songwriters based in Southern California, including himself. To date he has released five CDs and has toured the length and breadth of the United States dozens of times, just like a real live folk singer.

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(Photo by Muriel Paquin/Circa Early 1999)