

GLORY DAYS

By DAVE BARRY

Bruce Springsteen played my guitar. I am not making this up. It was the high point of my musical life. It was even better than the time when, for a few minutes, I was in the same airport as Ray Charles. I am never going to wash my guitar again. (Not that I ever did before.)

I should explain that I belong to a band called the Rock Bottom Remainders. It consists mostly of writers. The original concept was that people who spend all their time writing would enjoy a chance to express their musical talent. The flaw here is that most of us don't have any musical talent. So we compensate by playing amplified instruments loud enough to affect the weather. Also we stick to songs that are so well known that even when WE play them, people sometimes recognize them.

For example, we play Louie Louie, an extremely well-known song. You know how scientists have been trying fruitlessly for years to contact alien beings by broadcasting radio signals to outer space? Well, I think they should broadcast Louie Louie. I bet alien beings would immediately recognize this song and broadcast a response ("PLAY SOMETHING ELSE").

For a change of pace, the Rock Bottom Remainders also play Wild Thing, a song performed in a style known to classical musicians as "molto accelerando con carne," which means "basically the same as Louie Louie." We employ two powerful musical weapons when we perform this song. One is Roy Blount Jr., a great humor writer who has the raw natural musical talent of a soldering iron. We give Roy two vocal solos in Wild Thing. At the end of the first verse, the band pauses dramatically, and Roy is supposed to say, "I LOVE you"; at the end of the second verse, he's supposed to say, "You MOVE me." These two lines are Roy's sole musical responsibility for the entire night, and he takes it seriously, pacing around before the performance, muttering his lines over and over to himself. So when we get to the end of the first verse, we stop, and everybody turns expectantly to Roy, waiting for him to say "I LOVE you," and Roy, frowning with deep concentration, inevitably says: "You MOVE me." And then the rest of us, in a smooth professional manner, stagger around and try not to wet our pants.

Our other big musical weapon on Wild Thing is Joel Selvin, a writer and rock critic for The San Francisco Chronicle, who plays a flute solo, using a plastic flute that looks like the kind you get from gum ball machines, only cheaper. Joel, like most of your top international flute players, learned this solo by watching an instructional videotape at home. The problem is, when he gets on stage with the band, he tends to get nervous and blow REALLY HARD, so that instead of notes, the flute emits a series of extremely high-pitched squeaks, like a gerbil that fell into a french-fry machine. Sometimes Joel's entire solo is above the range of human hearing. He'll be wailing away, his face red, his fingers moving in the manner prescribed by the videotape, and it looks really dramatic, but nobody can hear anything. Meanwhile, for hundreds of miles around, dogs are jerking their heads up and thinking: "Hey! Somebody's playing Wild Thing!"

I play lead guitar in this band. My sole musical qualification is that I am slightly more experienced than the guy who plays rhythm guitar, Stephen King, well-known author of children's books (*The Little Engine That Could Sneak Into Your Room At Night And Eat Your Eyes*). Stephen has a custom-made black guitar with little white mother-of-pearl spiders crawling up the neck. One time I was showing him how to play a certain chord, and I pointed at a spot on the neck and said, "Put your finger here," and he said, "Oh, on THAT spider." In May the Rock Bottom Remainders performed at a party in Los Angeles at the annual convention of the American Booksellers Association. It went very well. The audience members were receptive, by which I mean they had been drinking. Some people got so receptive that they demanded an encore, so we decided to play Gloria, which we like because it's even simpler to play than Louie Louie. You can throw a guitar off a cliff, and as it bounces off rocks on the way down, it will, all by itself, play Gloria.

So we went back on stage, and I picked up one of the two guitars I'd been using, and just as we were about to start, Stephen King tapped me on the shoulder and said, "We have a special guest." I turned around, and there was Bruce Springsteen. I still don't know how he came to be at this convention; I don't believe he's a bookseller. All I know is, he was picking up the other guitar. My guitar. "Bruce," I said to him. "Do you know the guitar part to Gloria?" This is like asking James Michener if he knows how to write his name.

"I think so," he said.

So we played Gloria, and I say in all modesty that it was the best version of that song ever played in the history of the world, going back thousands of years. I would shout, "G . . . L . . . O . . . R . . . I-I-I-I-A"; and the band, including Bruce Springsteen, would respond "GLORIA!"; and the crowd would scream as only truly receptive booksellers can scream. I could have died happy right then. Anyway, now I'm back in my office, tapping at my computer, being a columnist again. But from time to time my mind drifts back to that night, remembering how it sounded. I haven't polled the other members of the Remainders, but I think we would definitely let Bruce join the band, if he wrote a book.

I would even let him play lead guitar.

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