

***The Oblivion Riff*** – c. Brett Milano 2012

The night my band saved rock'n'roll was the night our drummer was catatonic, the law was after us and we were about to get chased out of Los Angeles. Most of all it was the night I caught the Oblivion Riff, that noise I'd been questing for all two years' worth of my musical life. It was the sound that guided my band through its short, obscure existence. Doesn't matter that you never heard of the Dipthong Messiahs: we made history that night, we kept the music from dying. And whether you heard it or not, we shook the planets with our sound.

What was it like to be part of that mythical, celebrated Summer of Love? Beats me—None of that meant anything to us. We were beach kids, and one summer naturally ran into another with no seasons in between. We only started a band because one kind of physical release seemed as good as another, and those other releases could be harder to come by. So we picked up instruments wherever we could—usually other people's garages in the middle of the night. It added to the sense of destiny we were developing: Whatever instruments came to us were the ones we were destined to play. I became the lead guitarist, and therefore the bandleader, because I found one first.

We owe our name to one of the very first gigs we played: It was 1967, and throngs were gathered at the Avalon Ballroom for the Grateful Dead. Opening for the Dead was an honor that went only to the most trusted, best-loved bands. We weren't one of those. But we acted like we were—muscled right in there with our instruments under our arms, had a few tough-looking friends that sure looked like roadies, and made our way to the stage just as the crowd's acid was starting to kick in. There were already four bands on the bill, so we figured nobody would mind one more; and it confirmed our sense of destiny that nobody moved fast enough to stop us. Not only hadn't we rehearsed, we also didn't know any songs, but we looked and felt great, having got hold of the same substances a few hours in advance. It was pure aggression that got us onstage, but once we looked out at the faces, we had a revelation: Hey, these people love us! Maybe we even love them! And wasn't that really more important than whether we could come up with anything to play or not?

So we didn't—We just started moving our hands and moving around, since we didn't have any real roadies and nothing was plugged in anyway. And sure enough, the crowd started drifting towards us. I remember the girl upfront who was swirling and staring right into my eyes for the whole five-hour (or so it felt) set—we moved with the rhythm, something felt but not heard. They were loving us, we were loving them and damn, we still weren't playing, just moving our hands in time with this silence. For the first time we felt a blinding white flash of meaning and connection—Yes, we'll take more of this. We never played a note of music, which would probably have cheapened the experience anyway.

We got out alive, and never heard a disparaging word from anybody—Well, nearly any body. Someone from the Berkeley student newspaper was there on assignment, clearly felt it his duty to stay straight for the show, and wrote of us: "These guys are either messiahs or dipshits, and I don't think they're messiahs." We loved it, and duly adopted "Dipshit Messiahs" for about a week. The Sunset Strip clubs weren't as friendly to that kind of thing as you'd hope, though: Sure, the Fugs could get gigs, but they were from New York. We had to come up with something cleaner, so I suggested "dipthong messiahs"

as a quick substitute. My bandmates reacted like I'd just split an atom. "Man, that's great," said our drummer, seriously wide-eyed. "Like, wasn't Jesus always wearing those wooden dipthongs on his feet?" Not sure if he ever figured it out, but hey: "Messiah" is itself a dipthong. Once I figured that one out, I was able to mess with the heads of everyone who ever asked about our name.

Such was the aimless nature of our band until the Riff came to us. Not that we didn't learn to play some actual music. It was easy, just string a few chords together and call it a song; audiences could be generous. Some of them just wanted any old sound, and any old sound was what we made. Anyway, by now we'd developed a different specialty: Since we'd already learned that sneaking onstage was easy, sneaking backstage was nothing. We made every party, we soaked up the vibe of every show, missed most of the music but we made sure that the headliners never overdosed by using up the excess ourselves. Backstage with Jefferson Airplane one night, Marty even thanked me for keeping too much nose candy away from Grace. "That's us, the volunteers of America," I replied. Seemed like every word we uttered got used by someone else.

We were a band without a purpose, but that all changed when we got to Woodstock, and it was there we discovered our true vocation. It was a magical gig, the kind where you look out at the audience and see the beauty and feel the connectedness. No doubt it would have been even more magical if we had been performing. But it was close enough to get a gig as roadies for Quill, best remembered as...well, not really remembered at all. But they were Boston guys who came to hang with us for a few days, they were headed back east and had space in their van. We needed to get there, they needed someone willing to carry amps, so there we were. We still have no memory of what their music sounded like—us and the rest of the world.

It was backstage though, that I assumed my volunteer role and intercepted some acid that was intended for the Jefferson Airplane. (Taking something forcibly and scaring the carrier causes bad vibes and that's stealing. Taking it from their supplier's pocket when his head is turned is intercepting; it only comes to you if it was meant to). This stuff was said to be making the rounds and it was just unbelievable, within a half-hour of dropping it I began feeling my head open layer by layer. And I heard what was inside my head, I heard the Oblivion Riff—not just a Lost Chord, this was something bigger and louder, this was rock and roll. It was a sound more forceful than anything onstage, certainly grander than anything we'd played. And when the Riff appeared, all became clear: Under its influence I knew what to play and what to do. From now on the Riff would be my guide, when I heard it there would surely be inspiration.

And indeed, inspiration was striking right now as we stood in the crowd at Woodstock. What I did was to instruct our bass player to practice going into convulsions. And to go limp while I dragged him through the crowd, making our way to the nearest medical tent. "My friend's freaking out badly," I said to the friendly longhaired intern working there. Yes, it was acid. No, we're not sure where it's from, but it looks to be going around. What did it look like? Kinda dirty and brown. I let him lie there, then got someone to drag the drummer in. He was even better at doing convulsions. Acid? Yes. Dirty and brown? Sounds about right. Freaking out? Just look. We even got a couple random strangers to do the same, with the promise of a payoff: More convulsions and general freakiness blamed on dirty looking acid. The well-meaning medic was good with sympathy and that was about it; but I finally prodded him into action.

“Uh, you think we should get word around that this stuff is specifically not very good?” Oh sure, we can do that. Poor guy seemed like he’d been waiting for an excuse to leave the tent, carry a word backstage and hear some music—Must have been great music, because we never saw him again and could drop the freaked-out act. But the stage announcement finally came, just like we’d hoped: “Take this with however many grains of salt, but that brown acid is specifically not very good”—the announcer even used my wording! From that moment on, the “brown acid” became the scourge of Woodstock and the stuff of nightmares. I always felt a little sorry for all the people on perfectly good trips until the announcement broke. But from that moment, you couldn’t give the stuff away—well, actually you could give it away, as people scrambled to get rid of this wonderful acid. The Woodstock nation gained one of its enduring legends. The Diphthong Messiahs gained free trips for months to come.

It became my mission to find that Oblivion Riff, to play that elusive sound just the way I had heard it at Woodstock. Somehow it never quite came through, but with a pure heart and enough brown acid, the moment would come. Let them call us a sloppy, untrained, indifferent band—I can assure you that we were not indifferent. We were in touch with the vibrations of the universe, and not everybody was going to be ready for that. The closest glimpse I got was onstage at Avalon one night—by now we could get to the bottom of the bill by legit means-- we hit that sound during the first song and wouldn’t let it go. I felt the Riff was finally within reach; my guitar called forth a rush of sound and sensuality. I saw the same wide eyes glaring at us. We wouldn’t let it go until they cut the power on us. Afterward in a state of pure exhilaration, I asked the guy at the mixing board what it sounded like. “It sounded like ‘Louie Louie’, “ he said. Perfect—A double diphthong! So we hadn’t gotten quite the desired sound yet—More practice and it would come.

It was that other festival—the notorious one that the Rolling Stones threw later that year at Altamont Raceway—that led to our night of glory. By now our ability to get backstage and indifference to authorities was getting us respect, even if our music wasn’t. We were always able to pick up some pocket money by making deliveries backstage, and to soak up some reflected glory in the green room. But we knew we needed glory of our own: We needed to make a record;. And we needed money to do it. We knew that the decade was ending and those freewheeling peace-and-love days were ending, and that was fine with us: The next phase was coming, it would be more extreme and call for more severe music, which we would be glad to provide We would finally unleash the Oblivion Riff, and the future of music would belong to us.

And fate delivered us an opportunity at Altamont, in the presence of a seedy looking character who needed to get backstage. “You can get to the Stones, right?” he said. “I’ve got a little delivery here for Keith. The other guys in the band know what I’m there for, and I’m the last guy they want to see around. So I need someone to deliver this for me. Get it to him, he needs it bad. And you need to get me paid as well. Keith’s been holding out on me lately, so he knows how important it is that he gets his and I got mine. Got me?” We got him. And carefully took the bag he offered while he fled for parts unknown. He was so paranoid of the other Stones finding him there that he split the show and made us swear we’d meet him downtown tomorrow morning—If we didn’t, finding where we lived was easy enough.

A shipment for Keith. What band had ever been luckier? We knew dozens of people who'd pay big for access to that. And now they'd all have their chance. One long afternoon at home to dilute the stuff, a couple hours to spread the word, a few minutes to unload it all, and we had enough money in hand to pay for our studio session. Sure, we were probably risking our lives, but we didn't care: The Riff was guiding us, and history would demand that we make our session. Besides, we'd never ripped anybody off before, so our reputation was probably cleaner than Keith's. The money was paid, a session was booked. Tomorrow night we would find it.

But first we had to get past our dealer friend. If we missed our rendezvous he'd be coming after us, so we thought it wiser to just show up downtown as agreed. "Did you make the delivery?" Sure, of course. "Keith didn't pay you, did he?" Could scarcely believe our luck—This guy actually suspected he wouldn't get paid? "Uh, no, he didn't. Really nice guy, though. But he's not leaving town yet, and he swore up and down that if he could have a little more tonight, he'd pay back everything he owes." That's what I thought, said the man. "Look, I want you to give him this. And I want to make sure that you do. So you don't have to meet me here—I'll be at your house tomorrow morning, and you can be sure to give me all the money then."

Not that we cared; we planned to be on the road by morning. Things were already heating up after our dope-selling caper: People who'd figured out their stuff was watered down started putting word out. The cop car parked down the street from my flophouse didn't look very friendly. Nor did the brick I saw go through our window before someone ran away. We were about to leave town in disgrace—after the session, of course. Our van and instruments were already safe at the studio. Everything else we owned was on someone's couch or on our backs. It was time for the Diphthong Messiahs to hit the road—We'd be back in glory soon enough.

That night in the studio, the magic happened. I knew the night would be special when the tapes were turned on, I reached for the first chord, and there it came: One grand percussive sound, dramatic and omnipotent. The very sound of planets colliding. Or maybe the sound of our drummer falling headfirst over his kit. "Take two!" shouted the engineer, as the drummer tried to squirm out of a face-down position. No, I said to him, you didn't take any of Keith's stuff, did you? A perfectly vacant look in response. Never mind, never mind. You can still move? Good—Then you can still play. We've got this one chance and we're using it. There will be drums on this record, and you're gonna play them. Now get that kit back together and get yourself back there.

He grunted and assumed the position. And we launched into "Riffquest," a song I'd written to summon forth the Oblivion Riff. It only had two chords and a lot of repetition, meaning you could leave the confines of the song and let the trance take over. And tonight it worked, it clicked as never before. And it was our drummer that did it: Thanks to the stuff he'd taken, he was way off and totally wrong—but in a beautiful way. A bit of coaxing the fretboard, turning everything louder, and there it was: The Oblivion Riff, perfectly formed. Just the way I'd heard it at Woodstock. Time stopped. We seemed to play that riff for hours, maybe even days, certainly through the next and into the next morning, I'm sure I saw the sun rising as I wrapped up my eternal epic solo.

“How long was that?” I asked the engineer as our jam of glory finally wound down. “Two minutes, fifty-six seconds,” he replied. Indeed, the fates were with us—a three minute record that felt like an eternity! This would take the world by storm, a record that could stop time. For the B-side, we accordingly played any old thing—might have even been the same thing backwards for all we knew—but the job had been done.

We didn’t sleep much after our historic session, since we spent the next five hours getting our drummer taken care of. Turned out I’d already saved his life by insisting he stay awake long enough to play—if he’d nodded out, he might not have gotten back up. We turned over the remains of the stuff he’d ingested, and learned it was low-grade smack mixed with horse tranquilizer. A good hit’s worth was enough to incapacitate our drummer, but it was also a dose sufficient to finish off a much weaker man. Like, say, a rail-thin English guitarist who didn’t eat much. One whose dealer was mightily pissed off at him for what was probably a few months of unpaid bills. A dealer who thought he could hang the whole thing on some obscure rock band. And who disappeared to parts unknown after laying the dirty deed on us.

Our record? It never came out. Our one-band caravan made it to New York, where we were told by various labels that it sounded too primitive, too regressive, or just that it sounded like “Louie Louie.” We managed a few gigs in different cities before accepting our role as unsung geniuses. We did become legends in some circles, though: Some kids in Seattle during the 90s told us they regularly stayed up all night blasting both sides of our single, we’re told a group called Riffquest was starting to get bookings. One of their little mimeographed magazines even published a story on “Why the Dipthong Messiahs Were Better than the Beatles.” The reasons they gave were “Because they were primitive, they were regressive, and every note they played sounded just like “Louie Louie.”

So that was the night we saved rock and roll: The night of our first and last recording session, December 7, 1969, the night after Altamont. The night our drummer didn’t die. Keith Richards didn’t either. Don’t all thank us at once.

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