

STEAM ENGINE TIME

BY LEWIS SHINER

THE KID TURNED UP the gaslight in his room. The pink linen wallpaper still looked a little dingy. Ever since J. L. Driskill had opened his new place in December of '86 the Avenue Hotel had been going downhill.

There was a framed picture on the wall and the Kid had been staring at it for an hour. It was an engraving of a Pawnee Indian. The Indian's head was shaved except for a strip of hair down the middle. There were feathers in what hair he had, and it hung down over his forehead.

He compared it to what he saw in the mirror. He was pretty badly hung over from jimson weed and unlabeled whiskey the night before. His fine yellow hair went every which way and his eyes were mostly red. He got out his straight razor, stropped it a couple of times on his boot, and grabbed a hank of hair.

What the hell, he thought.

It was harder to do than he thought it would be, and he ended up with a lot of tiny cuts all over his head. When he was done he took the razor and used it to cut the bottom off his black leather duster coat. He hacked it off just below the waist. For a couple of seconds he wondered why in hell he was doing it, wondered if he'd lost his mind. Then he put it on and looked in the mirror again and this time he liked what he saw.

It was just right.

THERE'D BEEN A SALOON at the corner of Congress Avenue and Pecan Street pretty much from the time Austin changed its name from Waterloo and became the capital of Texas. These days it was called the Crystal Bar. There was an overhang right the way round the building, with an advertisement for Tom Moore's 10 cent cigars painted on the bricks on the Pecan Street side. The fabric of the carriages at the curb puffed out in the mild autumn breeze.

The mule cars were gone and the street cars were electric now, thanks to the dam that opened in May of the year before. They were calling Austin "the coming great manufacturing center of the Southwest." It was the Kid's first big city. The electric and telegraph wires strung all over downtown looked like the history of the future, block-printed across the sky.

The Kid was a half-hour late for a two-o'clock appointment with the Crystal's manager. The manager's name was Matthews, and he wore a bow tie and a starched collar and a tailormade suit. "Do you know 'Grand-Father's Clock is Too Tall for the Shelf?'" Matthews asked the Kid.

The Kid had kept his hat on. "Why sure I do." He took his steel-string Martin guitar out of the case and played it quiet with his fingers. "It was

bought on the morn of the day he was born/And was always his treasure and pride/But it stopped—short—never to go again/When the old man died.”

I'm going to God-damned puke, the Kid thought.

“Not much of a voice,” Matthews said.

“All I want is to pass the hat,” the Kid said. “Sir.”

“Not much of a hat, either. All right, son, you can try it. But if the crowd don't like it, you're out. Understand?”

“Yes sir,” the Kid said. “I understand.”

THE KID CAME BACK at nine that night. He'd bought some hemp leaves from a Mexican boy and smoked them but they didn't seem to help his nerves. It felt like Gentleman Jim Corbett was trying to punch his way out of the Kid's chest.

The ceiling must have been thirty feet high. The top half of the room was white with cigar smoke and the bottom half smelled like farts and spilled beer. Over half the tables and all but a couple of seats at the bar were full. The customers were all men, of course. All white men. They said ladies dared not walk on the east side of the Avenue.

Nobody paid him much attention, least of all the waitresses. The Kid counted three of them. One of them was not all that old or used-up looking.

Some fat bastard in sleeve garters pounded out “The Little Old Cabin in the Lane” on a piano with a busted soundboard. The Kid knew the words. They talked about the days when “de darkies used to gather round de door/When dey used to dance an sing at night.” If there was anything going to keep him from turning yellow and going back to the hotel, that had to be it.

There was a wooden stage about three feet wide and four feet high that ran across the back of the room. Just big enough for some fat tart to strut out on and hike up the back of her skirts. The Kid set the last vacant bar stool up on the stage with his guitar case. He climbed up and sat on the stool. It put him just high enough up to strangle on the cloud of smoke.

The piano player finished or gave up. Anyway he quit playing and went over to the bar. The Kid took out his guitar. He had a cord with a hook on the end that came up under the back and let him carry the weight of it on his neck. It was what they called a parlor guitar, the biggest one C. F. Martin and Sons made. With his copper plectrum and those steel strings it was loud as Jesus coming back. Still the Kid would have liked a bigger sound box. It would have made it even louder.

Somebody at the bar said, “Do you know ‘Grand-Father's Clock?’”

“How about ‘Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay?’” said somebody further down. The man was drunk and started singing it himself.

“No, ‘Grand-Father's Clock!’” said another one. “Grand-Father's Clock!”

The Kid took his hat off.

Maybe the whole bar didn't go quiet, but there was a circle of it for thirty or forty feet. The Kid looked at their faces and saw that he had made a mistake. It was the kind of mistake he might not live through.

There were upwards of fifty men looking at him. They all wore narrow brim hats and dark suits and the kind of thick mustaches that seemed to be meant to hide their mouths in case they ever accidentally smiled.

They were none of them smiling now.

The Kid didn't see any guns. But then none of them looked like they needed a gun.

The Kid played a run down the bass strings and hit an E 7th as hard as he could with his copper pick. "Rolled and I tumbled," he sang, "cried the whole night long." He was so scared his throat was swollen shut and his voice came out a croak. But his hand moved, slapping the rhythm out of the guitar. The craziness came up in him at the sound of it, to be playing that music here, in front of these people, rubbing their faces in it, like it or not.

"Rolled and I tumbled, lord," he sang, "cried the whole night long." He jumped off the stool and stomped the downbeat with his bootheel. "Woke up this morning, did not know right from wrong."

He pounded through the chords again twice. He couldn't hold still. He'd seen music do that to folks, lived with it all his life, sharecropping in a black county with the families just one generation out of slavery, seeing them around their bonfires on Saturday nights and in their churches Sunday mornings, but this was the first time it had ever happened to him.

It was time for a verse and he was so far gone all he could sing was "Na na na na" to the melody line. When it came around again he sang, "Well the engine whistlin', callin' Judgment Day/I hear that train a whistlin', callin' Judgment Day/When that train be pass by, take all I have away."

Through the chords again. It was play or die or maybe both. The song roared off the tracks and blew up on B 9th. The last notes hung in the air for a long time. It was so quiet the Kid could hear the wooden sidewalk creak as somebody walked by outside.

"Thank you," the Kid said.

One at a time they turned away and started talking to each other again. A man in a plaid suit with watery blue eyes stared at him for another few seconds and then hawked and spat on the floor.

"Thank you," the Kid said. "I'd now like to do one I wrote myself. It's called 'Twentieth Century Man.' It's about how we got to change with the times and not just let time get past us. It goes a little like this here." He started to hit the first chord but his right hand wouldn't move. He looked down. Matthews had a hold of it.

"Out," Matthews said.

"I was just getting 'em warmed up," the Kid said.

"Get the hell out," Matthews said, "or by thunder if they don't kill you I'll do it myself."

"I guess this means I don't pass the hat," the Kid said.

HE SAT ON the board sidewalk and wiped the sweat off the guitar strings. When he looked up the not-so-old waitress was leaning on the batwings, watching him.

"Was it supposed to be some kind of minstrel song?" she asked. "Like the Ethiopian Serenaders?"

"No," the Kid said. "It wasn't no minstrel song."

"Ain't heard nothin' like it before."

"Not supposed to have. Things everybody heard before is for shit. 'The Little Old Cabin in the Lane.' Songs like that make people the way they are."

"What way is that?"

“Ignorant.”

“What happened to your hair?”

“Cut it.”

“Why?”

“So it’d be different.”

“Same with your coat?”

“That’s right.”

“You sure like things different.”

“I guess I do.”

“Where’d your song come from?”

“Back home.”

“Where’s that?”

“Mississippi.”

“Well,” she said. “I sort of liked it.”

The Kid put the guitar back in the case. He shut the lid and closed the latches. “Thanks,” he said. “You want to fuck?”

She looked at him like he was a dog just tried to pee on her shoe. She made the batwings bang together as she spun away hard and clomped away across the saloon.

THEY’D LAID AUSTIN OUT in a square. Streets named after Texas rivers went north and south, trees went east and west. The south side of the square lay along the Colorado River so they called it Water Avenue. There was West Avenue and North Avenue and East Avenue.

East of East Avenue was colored town. The Kid carried his guitar east down Bois d’Arc Street, pronounced BO-dark in Texas. Past East Avenue there weren’t street lights any more. Babies sat barefoot in the street and there was music but it didn’t seem to be coming from anywhere in particular. The air smelled like burned fat.

The Kid finally saw a bar and went inside. This time it got quiet for him right away. “Son,” the man behind the bar said, “I think you in the wrong part of town.”

“I want to play some music,” the Kid said.

“Ain’t no music here.”

“They call it ‘blue music.’ You ever hear of it?”

The man smiled. “Didn’t know music came in no colors. Now you run along, before you make a mistake and hurt you self.”

HE WENT BACK to his hotel long enough to pack his bag and then he went down to the train station. He sat on a bench there and read a paper somebody had left behind. It was called *The Rolling Stone*. It seemed to be a lot of smart aleck articles about books and artists. There was a story by somebody called himself O. Henry. The Kid didn’t find anything in there about music.

But then, what would you write about a song like “Grand-Father’s Clock” or “The Little Old Cabin in the Lane”?

An old colored man pushed a broom back and forth, looking over at the Kid every once in a while. “Waitin’ for a train?” the old man finally asked.

“That’s right.”

“Ain’t no train for two hour.”

“I know that.”

He pushed his broom some more. “That your git-tar?” he asked after while.

“It is,” the Kid said.

“Mind if I have me a look?”

The Kid took it out of the case and handed it to him. The old man sat next to the Kid on the bench. “Pretty thing, ain’t it?”

“You play?” the Kid asked him.

“Naw,” the old man said. He held the guitar like it was made out of soap and might squirt out of his hands if he squeezed down. “Well. Maybe I used to. Just a little. Ain’t touched one in years, now.”

“Go ahead,” the Kid said. The old man shook his head and tried to hand the guitar back. The Kid wouldn’t go for it. “I think maybe you could still play some.”

“Think so?” the old man said. “Well, maybe.”

He put his right thumb on the low E string and just let it sit there. After a while he fitted his left hand around the neck and pushed at the strings a little. “Oooo wee,” he said. “*Steel strings.*”

“That’s right,” the Kid said.

The old man closed his eyes. His head started to go back and for a second the Kid thought maybe the old man was drunk and fixing to pass out. Then the old man took a jack knife out of his pocket and set it on the knee of his jeans.

It made the Kid uncomfortable. He didn’t think the old man was actually going to knife him over the guitar. But he couldn’t see any other reason for the thing to be out.

The old man didn’t open the blade. Instead he fitted the handle between the ring finger and little finger of his left hand. Then he ran it up and down the strings. It made an eerie sound, like a dying animal or a train whistle gone crazy.

Then the old man started to play.

The Kid had never heard anything like it. The notes howled and screamed and cried out bloody murder. The old man played till his fingers bled and the high E string broke in two.

When it was over the old man sat for a second, breathing heavy. Then he handed the guitar back. “Sorry about that string, son.”

“Got me another one.” Tears ran down the Kid’s face. He didn’t want to wipe them off. He thought maybe if he just left them alone the old man might not notice. “Where...where did you learn to do that?”

“Just somethin’ I figured out for my own self. Don’t mean nothin’.”

“Don’t mean nothin’? Why, that was the most beautiful thing I ever heard in my life.”

“You know anything about steam engines?”

The Kid stared at him. A couple of seconds went by. “What?”

“Steam engines. Like on that locomotive you gonna be ridin’.”

The Kid just shook his head.

“Well, they had all the pieces of that steam engine lyin’ around for hundreds of years. Wasn’t nobody knew what to do with ‘em. Then one day five, six people up and invent a steam engine, all at the same time. Ain’t no explanation for it. It was just steam engine time.”

“I don’t get it,” the Kid said. “What are you tryin’ to say?”

The old man stood up and pointed at the guitar. “Just that you lookin’ for a life of misery, boy. Because the time for that thing ain’t here yet.”

JUST BEFORE DAWN, as the train headed west toward New Mexico, it started to rain. The Kid woke up to lightning stitched across the sky. It made him think about electric streetcars and electric lights. If electricity could make a light brighter, why couldn’t it make a guitar louder? Then they’d have to listen.

He drifted back to sleep and dreamed of electric guitars.

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