

It's Only Rock and Roll

By Bruce Pollock

Chapter One

He had become by then a figure of gossip and speculation, of rumor and misconception. Dressed in jeans and a black velvet jacket, cowboy boots, V-neck T-shirt with a pocket for keys, spare change, chewing gum, scraps of paper bearing the scribbled phone numbers of available women, black hair creeping past his collar, the subject of this idle chatter, double talk in singles bars, differences of opinion in neighborhood laundromats, claimed to be a New York City expatriate named Bloom, who fled a bookkeeper's pension to pursue his humble dream of playing his songs in front of a real audience. But what few cognoscenti there were in the tiny upstate New York town of Elvira didn't believe it. There was no way a slick wordsmith like Bloom, two parts Mose Allison, one part Randy Newman, with the melodic chops of a Carole King could have remained undiscovered, even by his mid-20s. According to the rumblings and the mumblings at the comic book store, there was something too familiar about the way he stood up to bash the low notes on the piano. Something too practiced about his between songs patter, two parts Jean Shepherd, one part Ramblin' Jack Elliot. He was obviously a pro, or a former pro, here in hiding from an ex-wife or two, a string of lawsuits, the remaining members of his band.

Some thought he could be Lloyd, of Lloyd's of London, the crazed Glam outfit that used to burn their amplifiers and all their equipment onstage after every concert until they went bankrupt in 1976 after two gigs. Except for the fact that he had no British accent. His easygoing nasal twang was more Austin, Texas by way of Newark, New Jersey. Others claimed he was the ex-lead singer of the Bleeps, an area group that stood on the brink of making it in 1973, courted by a&r men from three major labels, all of whom wanted to strip him from the band and make him a solo artist. No one could recall his name, just the legend, perhaps an exurban legend, that he refused their offers, wouldn't turn his back on buddies he'd known since grade school. Too bad the buddies weren't as loyal when they kicked him out of the band. Whoever he was, his songs, his very presence, fueled the daydreams of the populace, who perhaps saw their obscure town should he manage to put it on the map as the logical successor to San Francisco in the sixties, or Akron, Ohio of just a few years before. They'd been packing the Black Hole for his once a week appearance every Saturday night for the past two years.

"I'm not exactly new in town anymore," said the young man called Bloom above some chords as the crowd got quiet, "but I'm finding out more and more about this place every day. Especially for an alley cat like me, used to being awakened at all hours of the night by frantic careening taxicabs, those eerie, wobbling fire sirens, or high-strung bleached blondes on amphetamines, the country life is like a revelation. I've never known such silence. Even in the beach town where I grew up, you had waves crashing in, college kids burning rubber on their roller skates, practically burning down the campus when the team finally won a game. I got out of there fast. I always wanted to live in the mountains, surrounded by stars, with no fears coiling up inside my small intestines of who's waiting, crouched, outside the candy store." His own best

audience, he laughed at his private joke. “I’d say it was like summer camp all year round, except I hated summer camp the year I went. I think it was the shorts.”

“Maybloom!” a voice cried out in the darkness, “you’re still a flake.”

If the sound of the name pierced the piano man like a bad review he recovered quickly enough by diving into song. “In the backwoods of the world,” he sang, “there’s a place you can find/far from the city’s pace/just a quiet space in time...”

“Maybloom, I love it,” the heckler shouted.

Bloom continued singing. “It’s a place to clean your mind/we’ll make our little world shine.”

“You’ve still got it, babe. You’ve still got it.”

“Shut the hell up,” a concerned listener offered on Bloom’s behalf.

“Give the people what they want!” the heckler replied, before subsiding.

Out of the applause Bloom segued into another tune, and then another, successfully navigating the set past the obnoxious drinker. By now he knew who he was. And he couldn’t say he hadn’t been expecting him. Or that mixed in with the anger and the shock of being discovered at last wasn’t a bit of a thrill to come across one of the few souls on the planet who knew he’d once killed a man.

And given birth to another.

“They told me you were up in the sticks, Maybloom,” said Ezra Child, popping his head into Bloom’s makeshift dressing area, the size of a voting booth. “They didn’t tell me you were in the *sticks* of the sticks.” Moving into the room, in a leather raincoat, wide-brimmed leather hat, Child forced the skinny piano player into a corner.

“Who’s ‘they’?” said Bloom. He knew Ezra wasn’t just passing through here for the hunting and the fishing or the strawberry jam they served with the pop tarts at the Elvira Inn.

“Later for naming names, my friend,” said Ezra. “And speaking of names--Bloom? That’s not much of a disguise. Even less of a pun.”

Bloom collected some sheet music from his changing bench, straightened out the pages, and put them into a worn portfolio. “I didn’t know I was in hiding.”

Ezra’s laugh rumbled in his ample gut. He wore knee high leather boots and a shaggy, handlebar mustache. In Elvira he’d be taken for either a heavy metal rocker or a truck driver. Over the course of his long career, he’d been both. “If you’re not in hiding, then why did I have to come looking for you? On a Trailways bus? In the middle of the winter?”

Bloom smirked. “I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

The older and larger man took a tentative perch on a nearby three legged stool. “All the accoutrements, huh?” he said, surveying the landscape. He opened his leather raincoat. He’d lost weight, was down below 250 for the first time since high school. Then he took off his leather hat, revealing himself to be totally bald.

“Whoa...” said Bloom, still clutching his portfolio to his chest, as if it might protect him like a bulletproof vest. “You weren’t even losing it last time I saw you.”

“Time flies when you’re not having fun,” said Ezra. “I had a lot of things then that I don’t have now. But enough about me. What about you? Are you happy here?”

“Oh yeah,” said Bloom, for a second thinking Ezra really cared about his well being. “I mean, I pay my own rent, grow my own rutabagas, bike to work,” he said, lying about the last two. “I don’t have a TV or a stereo set, but the owner here lets me use the piano during the day to write songs, so I guess you could say I have everything I need.”

“But *Eu*-gene,” said Ezra, dwelling mournfully on the initial syllable of Bloom’s also discarded first name, “you never even dropped me a line. Not even a Merry Christmas or a Happy Hanukkah.”

“I’m sorry, Ezra. I lost track of time.”

Ezra rubbed his head sadly. “Let me tell you something I never told anyone else. I didn’t want to be famous like you, famous by 21. I just wanted to make it before I lost my hair. Well, obviously, I blew that one, like everything else. Later for my hopes and dreams. But you, man, I thought you were my friend. We worked together for three and a half years.”

“Together?” said Bloom. “I was the one doing all the work. You just sat back and collected.”

Ezra sighed. “There was nothing to collect.”

Bloom agreed. “You didn’t even accept my collect phone calls.”

At the doorway a girl with curly blonde hair peeked in. “Closing time,” she said. She edged her way into the miniscule room, back to the wall, hands in the pockets of her hooded parka.

“You have any sway with this bird?” Ezra asked her.

“I should hope so,” she said. “We’re engaged to be engaged.”

“To be engaged,” Bloom quickly added.

“Mazel tov,” said Ezra.

“Hey,” said Bloom. “Keep the hell out of my personal life.”

Ezra raised his hands to defend his best intentions. “Sue me for being polite.”

“Maybe I should go,” said the girl.

“No, stay,” said Bloom. Then he changed his mind. “We’ll both go. I’d invite you to crash at my place, Ezra, but Greta is allergic to leather.”

“No problem,” said Ezra. “I was planning to find a room at the Inn.”

“There ain’t no Inn,” said Bloom. “Unless you’re talking about the Elvira Inn, and that’s pretty pricey.”

“There’s a Best Western over in Sparta,” said Greta. Bloom glared at her, but she glared back undaunted.

“Perfect,” said Ezra. “I trust I can trouble you people for a lift?”

“Of course,” said Greta, “if you don’t mind sitting in the back of a pickup truck.”

Although the sight of his former manager huddled in the wind hanging onto a spare tire gladdened his heart for a bit, Maybloom didn’t like the way Ezra had uttered that last perfect. It was as if he were planning on pitching a tent here, digging in. If so, it could be an even longer winter than usual.