

AMAZING JOURNEY

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BY DAN EPSTEIN

Guitar Aficionado
contributing writer
Dan Epstein travels to
Las Vegas for **Rock 'n' Roll
Fantasy Camp** and spends
five days communing with his
reawakened inner guitarist.

ONCE UPON A TIME, the notion of going to any sort of fantasy camp would elicit little more than a skeptical chuckle from yours truly. Wasn't that sort of thing for losers who wanted to play dress-up and recapture the glories of their lost youth?

But three years ago, a trip to baseball fantasy camp (a year-end bonus from the company I worked for) roundly disabused me of such cynicism. Playing ball with some of my childhood heroes was not only a total blast but also put me in touch with a side of myself that I'd nearly forgotten about.

So when *Guitar Aficionado* asked me if I wanted to go to Rock 'n' Roll Fantasy Camp in Las Vegas—where, among other things, I'd get to jam with Roger Daltrey of the Who—and keep a diary of the experience, I immediately accepted. And then I grabbed the nearest guitar and started frantically practicing.

1 DAY ONE: REAL-LIFE FANTASY

I can't remember the last time I was this nervous. Flying in to Vegas, all I can think about is how it's been more than a decade since I last played guitar in a band and that my six-string chops feel about as rusty as an abandoned pickup truck in a salt marsh.

But within 15 minutes of arriving at RRFC's new Las Vegas complex, located just a few blocks off the Strip, I'm already cranking out Who songs in one of the rehearsal rooms (all of which come complete with amps, drums, and P.A.s) with a hard-hitting drummer named Scott Lucia. We're joined by a familiar-looking bassist: Rudy Sarzo, best known for his Eighties tenures with *Ozzy Osbourne*, *Quiet Riot*, and *Whitesnake*, who appears to have barely aged since his *Metal Health* days. After asking us to adjust the room's fan so that it won't "Farrah-ize" his signature hairstyle, Rudy chimes in with some thunderous Entwistle-style runs. My ears are ringing happily,

my fingers feel alive, and my case of nerves has completely subsided.

This is RRFC session number three for Scott, a diehard Who fan who's here primarily for the chance to perform with Roger Daltrey and Who touring guitarist Simon Townsend. Dave Navarro and Stephen Perkins from *Jane's Addiction* are also on the special-guest list, as is Richie Furay of *Buffalo Springfield* and *Poco*.

But we'll be spending considerably more time with our camp "counselors," who include Sarzo, Dio/Black Sabbath drummer Vinny Appice, Heart guitarist Howard Leese, Alice Cooper guitarist/muscleman Kane Roberts, Keel frontman Ron Keel, and Brides of Destruction/Lita Ford drummer Scot Coogan—all of whom are faced with the unenviable task of turning groups of strangers into bona-fide rock bands in just a few days. Kip Winger, he of Winger fame, is the camp's musical director. As one counselor cracks during the introductions, "There are two rules of Rock 'n' Roll Fantasy Camp. Rule One is, Kip Winger is always right. Rule Two: see Rule One."

My counselor/bandleader is Teddy "Zig Zag" Andreadis, best known for his keyboard work with *Guns N' Roses* in the early Nineties, but who's also played and toured with everyone from *Carole King* to *Alice Cooper*. My bandmates are a motley but well-matched crew. Rolly DeVore, our drummer, is Larry David's stand-in on *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and the "Keith Moon" in an L.A.-area Who tribute band. Like me, he's never been to RRFC before. Ben Garrison, our bassist, is an investor from Dallas who is prone to comically irascible moods and the wearing of Day-Glo shorts. This is his 11th time at camp. Ed Oates, our other guitarist, has been here multiple times, as well. A retired Silicon Valley software entrepreneur, he's a limited investor in RRFC and also serves as a business advisor to the camp.

Our band's singer is Danny Dzialo, a professional Rod Stewart imper-

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(from left) Epstein (left) and Ace Face co-guitarist Ed Oates; throwing the goat with Roger Daltrey; performing "Baba O'Riley" with Daltrey; rocking the Rouge Lounge



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sonator from Detroit, who has Tourette syndrome. Though Danny's tics and vocal outbursts (which disappear when he sings) take a little getting used to, his desire to play nearly every hit in the Rod Stewart/Faces songbook is a bigger issue, since playing in a Rod Stewart cover band isn't exactly the rock and roll fantasy of anyone else in the room. Luckily, Teddy's diplomatic skills are as impressive as his keyboard playing, and since he's worked with Danny at previous RRFC sessions, he's able to rein him in somewhat. "I want to give all of you guys a chance to shine," Teddy insists.

After agonizing for weeks over which guitar to bring, I opted for my Shell Pink 1996 Japanese-made Fender "50th Anniversary" Telecaster, both for its striking looks and classic tones, and because—unlike with some of my more vintage axes—I won't be too devastated if it gets dinged up. Ed is slinging a late-Nineties Gibson Les Paul Standard with a natural maple top. Our two guitars look and sound great together, and since we both worship at the Keith Richards Church of Rhythm Guitar, we fall quite quickly and naturally into a joint lead/rhythm partnership.

Like the six other bands at camp, our goal is to put together a short set for two nights from now, when we'll take the stage at the MGM Grand's Rouge Lounge. We also need a song to play with Roger and Simon, so we pick "Baba O'Riley," the anthemic opener from 1971's *Who's Next*. Rolly has actually brought the song's iconic intro with him on a hard drive, so we're already halfway there. We kick around several other tunes, including Stevie Ray Vaughan's "The House Is Rockin'," Bob Seger's "Old Time Rock and Roll," and the Rod Stewart ballad "Have I Told You Lately." Teddy asks me if there's a song I'd like to sing. I suggest Neil Young's "Cinnamon Girl," something I last played with a college band nearly 25 years ago, and we work out the riffs and vocal harmonies until dinnertime.

I suddenly realize that I've been playing guitar for five hours straight, something I don't think I've done since the second Clinton Administration. I feel as elated as I am exhausted. For the first time in ages, I now remember why I loved playing in bands.

2 DAY TWO: GETTING IN TUNE

I now remember why I hated playing in bands. Our group begins the day in RRFC's recording pod, a soundproof glass box located on the MGM casino floor. We're supposed to be working on an original song, which we'll record via the pod's Cakewalk software setup, but our progress is seriously impeded by technical gremlins. It reminds me of all the dysfunctional and unproductive band practices I endured in my youth, with the added bonus of being gawked at by fanny pack-wearing tourists.

My mood brightens during lunch at the RRFC complex, when the counselors take the stage for a Q&A session moderated by Kip Winger. Many war stories are told, including Rudy Sarzo's hilarious tale of having to fetch and style wigs for a shaven-headed Ozzy during an early Eighties tour,

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and Kip's admission that he bankrolled his first Winger demos with the workman's comp check he received for blowing out his knee slipping on fake blood while playing with Alice Cooper.

I could listen to this stuff all day, but now it's time for the afternoon's Master Classes: hour-long tutorials with various counselors. On a whim, I decide to attend Kane Roberts' guitar class. Kane and I may have little in common in terms of guitar (or muscle) tone, but I'm here to expand my fretboard horizons. Sure enough, he shows me some nifty alternate-picking warm-up exercises, explains the Lydian mode to me in a way that actually makes sense, and tells me about working as a dealer in shady underworld blackjack games during his scuffling days. In other words, best guitar lesson ever.

3 DAY THREE: THE HOUSE IS ROCKING

Today's a big deal: Not only will the camp bands be making their debuts tonight at the MGM's Rouge Lounge but Roger Daltrey, Simon Townshend, and Dave Navarro are also coming in this afternoon to jam with us.

After affably taking part in a lunchtime Q&A session with the campers, Roger and Simon take the Big Room stage, and we're eventually called up to join them. It's completely surreal playing "Baba O'Riley" with Roger—I keep flashing back to the first time I saw *The Kids Are Alright*, the 1979 documentary that inspired me to pick up a guitar in the first place. It's even more surreal when I catch him cracking up over the fist-pumping choreography that Ed and I have worked up for the song's intro.

But we charge seamlessly through the song, and the goose bump-inducing sensation of hearing those dulcet Daltrey vocals roaring over my power chords is something I'll never forget. Afterward, we pose for photos with Roger and Simon, and they're both extremely complimentary about our performance. "I'm impressed," says Roger. "That's a really difficult piece of music!"

Even after this heavy feast of rock, there's still another course to be served this evening at the Rouge Lounge. Our band—named the Ace Faces in reference to both *Quadrophenia* and Rod Stewart—is up last. We kick off the set with Ed taking the mic on "The House Is Rocking," a good party number that gets the crowd—a fairly even mixture of campers, camp staff, and curious MGM guests—up and dancing. After that, I kick my fuzz pedal into amp-overloading action and lead us through a stomping version of "Cinnamon Girl." As I wring every last drop of juice from the song's one-note solo, something miraculous happens: I suddenly feel a quarter-century younger, overwhelmingly in love again with the magic of music and the endless possibilities of the universe, just



as I was in my early twenties. The rest of the set goes by in a total blur, and we leave the crowd cheering for more.

4 DAY FOUR: HOT LEGS AND PINK GUITARS

After the triumph of last night's set, we're feeling the inevitable post-show comedown today, made worse by various hangovers, as well as our inability to solidify the arrangement of "Twistin' the Night Away," which we cycle through ad nauseam.

We're going on last again tonight, but we're not feeling entirely confident about our set list, since it's mostly made up of songs that weren't tight enough to make last night's set. We are, however, going onstage under a new moniker, which (partially at my behest) has been changed to Children of Methlehem. The name gets a rise out of the crowd, but, surprisingly, so does our sloppy-but-energetic set. We open with Steppenwolf's "Born to Be Wild," with Rolly on vocals, followed by me taking the mic for a romp through T.Rex's "20th Century Boy." Both tracks go down a storm, as does Danny's Rod Stewart mini-set, which culminates with him pulling a dozen women onstage to dance as we lurch through "Hot Legs."

Afterward, Howard Leese stops me as I pass the bar. "Way to rock that pink Tele," he says. "Only real men play pink guitars. I know—I have 20 of 'em!"

5 DAY FIVE: NO PAIN, NO GAIN

On the final day of camp, we're graced by a visit from Richie Furay—big thrill, since I'm a huge Buffalo Springfield fan. Unfortunately, we've run out of time to learn a Springfield tune, so we ask Richie to play "Cinnamon Girl" with us. He's a good sport about it, and I get to "play Neil" while watching Richie thumping away on a big hollow-body. It's a definite *holy shit!* moment for me, though since Richie is also a pastor, I refrain from using that particular expression.

Children of Methlehem are slated to close tonight's show, so we've decided to stretch our set to seven songs. We're completely bonded as a band by now, even though most of us met only five days ago, and there's much talk beforehand about making this our best show yet. "I'm gonna leave everything on that stage," I promise Teddy.

In the audience tonight is my girlfriend Katie, who's flown in from L.A. for our final performance. Aside from the occasional karaoke excursion, she's never actually seen me perform onstage, so it's a real treat for me to be able to play for her for the first time. I dedicate "Cinnamon Girl" to her, and then, since it went over so well last night, we go straight into "20th Century Boy." As we boogie towards the song's close, I remember something Teddy told me in rehearsal the day before: "It's your song—you decide how we end it." I lock eyes with Rolly behind the kit, and leap

“YOU'RE GONNA FINISH THIS SET,” KIP WINGER SAYS, SLAPPING ME ON THE BACK LIKE MY HIGH SCHOOL BASEBALL COACH.”

rapturously into the air for a Pete Townshend-style final chord flourish. Unfortunately, I land on something slippery—probably ice or liquid from someone's spilled drink—my right knee goes all wobbly, and I finish the song with a squealing-feedback face plant.

Like Mrs. Fletcher in the old LifeCall ads, I've fallen and I can't get up. Several counselors and roadies rush to my aid. "Which knee is it?" asks Kip Winger. "The right one? Yeah, that's the same one that went out on me." The next thing I know, he and one of the roadies are propping me onto a barstool positioned in front of my microphone. "You're gonna finish this set," Kip says, slapping me on the back like my high school baseball coach.

I spend the rest of the show perched on the stool, chunking out chords while alternately cursing and laughing at my absurd predicament. We close with "Baba O'Riley," and my injury adds an extra touch of poignancy to the song, especially the part where I have to gingerly reach down with my left foot in order to kick on my boost pedal for the guitar solo.

Just as I never dreamed I'd ever jam with Roger Daltrey or Richie Furay, I never imagined that one day Kane Roberts would help lift me off a stage and into a waiting wheelchair. Unfortunately, I spend the entire end-of-camp jam in a service hallway behind the lounge, getting examined by paramedics, who determine that I don't appear to have broken anything.

Back up in the hotel room, Katie tells me that, despite my wipe out, she loved watching me play. "You were clearly born to do this," she says, delicately applying a bag of ice to my knee. Maybe it's the pain and adrenaline coursing through my system, but I suddenly start weeping uncontrollably. It's like I'm grieving for all the years where I ignored my inner guitarist, all the years I stayed away from the stage in the name of focusing on more "adult" pursuits. It's a very heavy moment, but it's a deeply cleansing one, as well.

So yeah, go figure. I'm the guy who survives baseball fantasy camp with nothing worse than a few bruises, but leaves Rock 'n' Roll Fantasy Camp in a wheelchair. Though I've come home with a badly overextended knee joint and a few fresh guitar dings as souvenirs, I've also returned with a renewed love for my Tele and for playing music in general. Once I'm fully ambulatory again, I plan to round up some pals for a jam session. Maybe I'll even put a band together.

And Rock 'n' Roll Fantasy Camp? I'd go back again in a four-four heartbeat. 🎸



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[from left] Epstein with Rod Stewart impersonator Danny Dzialo and the real Daltrey; windmilling post injury; squeezing a few last chords from his Telecaster