



Life is a blues. This unsolicited journey is an aching puzzle of disappointment and disillusion occasionally interrupted by glimpses of joy and searing spasms of pain. The vibrant intensity of love always shares the room with the phlegmy anguish of loss. And this journey is inevitably terminated against its strongest instincts. In the illuminated East, holy men have cultivated powerful techniques of breath and posture through which the best among them claim to have burned away their body cage with all its limits and deficiencies. Here in the Slaveship West, we have no such holy men. But some among us have in fact learned how to pour their red blood into these deep blues long enough to transform the hue of this melancholic entrapment into brilliant shades of purple. Jimi did it before he folded shop at the tender age of 27. Sun Ra danced beneath his glittery heliotrope standard, until he flew it off the planet after a mere 79 revolutions around our star. Neither one of these purple men is alive to tell us what they did and how they did it. Here then is a story told in purple by the one who lived it. This story begins in the City of Angels:

LAUGHS LAST: THE BEVIS GRIFFIN STORY

(SLIGHT RETURN)

by THOMAS STANLEY





I would say I grew up comfortably. Both of my parents were working parents. My dad [Melvin] owned his own barbershop business enterprise. My mother [Navoline], once I got old enough to attend school, she took employment managing stores. We were almost considered latchkey kids, except they made sure that there was a responsible adult in the household when we got home. I never had any outstanding financial stress or concerns as a child. Obviously, looking back we were still a relatively poor working-class, blue-collar family, but there were two cars in the garage. We were changing clothes with the seasons. I always had spending change. The furniture was always crisp.

In 1968, marital problems force Bevis' parents apart. His mother takes the children to Wichita Falls, Texas to live with her mother.

The move to Wichita Falls was very traumatic on several levels and not just the fact of being disenfranchised from my father. I had really just started to get my bearings in Los Angeles as a young teenager and the year 1968 was really a hot year musically speaking. I was just starting to find my way around the city and seeking out various musical events that a minor could attend. It was also a situation where I was just experiencing the aftermath of the Watts riots of 1965, which had really created a form of dystopia in South Central Los Angeles.

This was before Bloods and Crips; back then we were called Slausons. And we literally would have to fight for territorial respect. Just going to another school for an intermural sports event was a big deal, you know what I'm saying? I would say I was an affiliate because to be a hardcore gang member you would have to have come out of the army or something like that. That was the kind of mentality that I grew up with, although I really hated violence as a concept. It was kind of a "do or die" thing: You either knuckled up or you stayed home and that's just the way it was. By the time I got to Texas, I was kind of comfortable with that.

The kids in Wichita Falls High School had broke up into their little sub camps. You had the athletes and you had the agricultural farm kids – we called them the goat-ropers, like kids that roped bulls and cows and things. And then you had what back then we would call freaks; today they call them stoners. It just so happened that these kids that were the most experienced happened to be from the most affluent families. The city was composed of nouveau riche gas- and oil-lease millionaires juxtaposed against grinding poverty – kids who were literally struggling to get food on the table. Music was my ticket up and out. I was putting it together pretty fast that these rock and roll bands were getting rich. In my mind, I was like “well, that looks like the path to me.” You got to have a band, you know, so there was only about three bands in Wichita Falls. One of them was an early version of Franklin’s Mast that Jimmy [Jimmy Lee Saurage a/k/a Jimmy Sausage] had put together. Franklin’s Mast— that would have been 1969 into 1970—was Jimmy’s conceptual genesis. We were proto-metal. I had to discipline myself to get into a heavy pocket mode because I was just so intrigued by the musicality of Mitch Mitchell’s drumming style.

I graduated high school at 16. After, I went back to California to be with my dad for a little while. He had just been released from a sanatorium. He had been afflicted with tuberculosis and they used to quarantine TB victims back then. Ostensibly, I was going to go to college and enrolled in L.A. City College. I was going to study architecture because I always had a good artistic hand. I was above average in math and I was really interested in building. But my dad had always been in the crux of Los Angeles’ musical community. His barber shop was just a block away from this real popular 1950s, early ‘60s night spot called the Five-Four Ballroom which was a staple of the chitlin’ circuit. And because my dad used to run after-hours gambling operations – like crap games and card games – these musicians would come and gamble with my dad and that’s how he became friendly with a lot of them. He was friends with blues singer O. V. Wright. That was the first gig that I got. I went out on the road with O. V. Wright for almost four months in 1971. I got stranded by O. V. Wright in Canton, Ohio of all places – in the winter. He had gotten upside down with some gambling debt and just tipped out on the band in the middle of the night. I was going to try and tough it out and then my mother told me that my friend Jimmy Saurage was calling me from Austin, Texas and had left these numbers, and I called Jimmy and he was like, “yeah, I moved down here to Austin and I really was wondering if you would like to come down and jam because I want to restart the band. I was really hoping that you would think about coming down to join me.”

I was 18, going on 19, when I came down to Austin in the winter of 1971. We started performing together in 1972 in earnest. We had been exposed to a lot of the top Austin bands up in Wichita Falls when we were still in high school, because we would open a lot of dates for touring bands like ZZ Top and Trapeze and things like that. I was dressing like Hendrix in Wichita Falls. That was just like being black twice, because the homophobia was off the chain. People were treating me like a Martian, except the upside was that the girls were enamored of that. I was as close as any of them were going to get to meeting Jimi Hendrix. We embraced that whole thing about androgyny. You have to understand that I totally embraced rock ‘n roll as an alternative lifestyle. It wasn’t like a day job. It wasn’t something that I just did at night. We walked around getting arrested for female impersonation in broad daylight. They knew that we were basically off the chain. When I say “they” I’m talking about the police. When I would go out to east Texas or west Texas or southern Texas to tour, that’s where it became dangerous. We’ve had caravans of police stop us in midstream, dismantle the automobile, take everything out of the equipment van, looking for any reason [to arrest us]. They used to bust us for things like lewd and lascivious behavior, female impersonation, intent to incite riot, so on and so forth. That only amplified our reputation in Austin. The same way that the Sex Pistols and bands like the New York Dolls would get props, we were getting the same type of props for being so countercultural that people considered us dangerous and borderline insane.

But this was still in the aftermath of the Age of Aquarius and Austin was inundated with drug use. Everybody had their feet in the water. I was still so young. A lot of people in my circles, circles that I ran in, were doing amphetamines. Some of them were dabbling with cocaine, but cocaine was expensive.

It wasn't a whole lot of cocaine use going on in the '70s. San Francisco didn't have shit on Austin. I tell people all the time that it was Austinites that influenced the hippy scene in San Francisco. Those guys like Chet Helms [the father of San Francisco's 1967 Summer of Love who recruited Janis Joplin and founded Big Brother and the Holding Company] that used to run the Avalon Ballroom, a competitor to the Fillmore West. All those guys that ran Avalon were from Texas. Roky Erickson and the 13th Floor Elevators—that was the first band that went out to San Francisco when the Grateful Dead were called the Warlocks. They [the Dead] saw the 13th Floor Elevators and that's what flipped them over into the psychedelic mode. Roky Erickson and the 13th Floor Elevators — they're from Houston, Texas. [Erikson dropped out of Austin's William B. Travis High School in 1966, rather than cut his hair in compliance with the dress code.] When those guys went out to the west coast, they flipped the script. These guys were the precursors to that whole movement.

The upstart of it was that it really gave me a lot of access to touring acts coming through. My inspirations were always driven by the big picture. We found ourselves doing a regional tour with Steven Van Zandt, Little Steven from the E Street Band — he had a solo project called the Disciples of Soul where he was working with this guitar player named Jean Beauvoir who previously I had met when we had opened for the Plasmatics when he was their bass player. We opened for those guys in Texas. That was a dangerous band. So we had done these tours with Little Steven and little Steven was in my ear. He was like, "Man, if you could just get yourself back to New York, I could probably help you do some things, help you connect some dots." He was really kind of vague. I wasn't really sure what he was talking about. It wasn't like, I'm gonna give you a bag full of money. It's not like, I'm gonna sign you to my label or I'm gonna sign you to Bruce Springsteen's [label].

I didn't know what he had in mind, all I knew was it was an overture. I had a girlfriend at the time that was just graduating from the University of Texas at Austin with a fine art degree in photography and she wanted to break into editorial photography in New York, so she was game. So we sold all of our personal possessions and moved to New York and I never did connect the dots the way that I intended to with Steve Van Zandt. I enrolled myself into the Institute of Audio Research at NYU. Prior to that point I had always been at the mercy of engineers and technicians—people that wanted to record live gigs for an experiment or to broaden their own technical experience. I've been going into small studios where the guys didn't really have their chops up to industry standard, but they wanted to practice on me. And that's just painful. I wanted to enroll in school so that I could get enough acumen so I wouldn't be at the mercy of these hacks.

It was through [NYU] that I really got my first break. Through happenstance, I met Tim Hatfield who was a chief engineer at Media Sound Studio; [he] actually happened to be from Texas. Media was on par with the Hit Factory or the Power Station or the Record Plant. I got in there as an intern because Tim really liked my original material and I had this strong set of demos that I had developed from Austin. He wanted to form a little production company with me and see where we could take this thing. I would bring my songwriting partner up from Austin for a three-day weekend and book these midnight 'til six in the morning sessions and just set about the business of putting it all down.



As 1983 moved into 1984, I had some pretty substantial demos in my hip pocket. It was at that point that I was reading the Village Voice every week trying to suss out who was doing what where and Greg Tate was doing a lot of weekly columns and commentaries. I was just starting to hear whispers about Black Rock Coalition in some of Greg's early Voice articles. So I just called him up cold one day and introduced myself. "I want to meet Vernon Reid." Vernon Reid was in Greg's office the day that I called. He's like, "well, let me put you on the phone with Vernon." And Vernon and I had a five-minute discourse, and he was like, why don't you come down to the village? Come down and let's meet this Saturday." Actually, the meeting was down in Chinatown. It was him, Konda Mason, Craig Street, Bill Toles, Greg, not even ten people. One of the people that was there was Lester Bowie, from the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Vernon was like, "well, did you bring any material?" Back then, it was about cassettes, right. I said, "Yeah, I got a tape, man." I gave it to him and said, "Go ahead and bust it." He dropped it in the beat box and then the eyebrows jumped. It was on.

Bevis' efforts in New York eventually pay off when he gains the attention of one Jack Douglas, the legendary recording engineer/producer who was a shadow member of Aerosmith and produced John Lennon's last recorded works beginning with Imagine.

We had amalgamated and formed this touring party called the Black Rock Coalition Orchestra. In February 1987, we staged a two-day rock festival at CBGBs which was called the Stalking Heads of '87. My band Banzai Kik played just before Living Colour on both dates. As a result of the two shows at CBGBs, we hit the press pretty hard. We popped out and made enough of a splash to where I got a phone call from this executive named Ian Ralfini who used to be the executive vice president for Warner Brothers Records in the United Kingdom. His publicist was at both of those shows and said, like, "Yo, this Banzai Kik thing is definitely something you want to check out." You have to remember that at that time Prince was a big deal. Purple Rain had already hit. And Van Halen was a big deal. They're looking at me as if I'm a hybrid of Prince and Van Halen.

I went back into the studio and I wound up getting a meeting with Anthony Countey, who was the manager for the Bad Brains, and it was through Anthony that I was introduced to Lynne Robinson, a childhood friend of Anton Fig, the drummer that you always see on the David Letterman show. Anton Fig was a heavyweight session drummer at that time, and he had been in conversation with Jack Douglas. He wanted to form a new label of his own that was going to be distributed by EMI and I was going to be one of the first acts that he released under this new label called Supertrack. So he took us into the Record Plant. The irony was we booked into studio B, which is the same principle studio where Hendrix recorded Electric Ladyland. It was also his [Douglas'] pet studio. I knew a lot about his production technique and his production aesthetic and he was like the hard rock guy. What Nile Rodgers was in the '80s, Jack Douglas was in the '70s, and he was my guy.

We went in and recorded the first six songs at the Record Plant and then Jack and I went to the Midem Convention in Cannes and he introduced me to a bunch of his label executives and then we took a pit stop back in London. He wanted to introduce me to some of the principles of this new label that I was about to be signed to and then, when I got back home, we went on hiatus for the holiday because it was Christmas time. And, uh, while I was on hiatus, my mom had an altercation and shot and killed my dad.

At this point in our discussion, Bevis asks for a break to collect himself. He tells me he would like to call back in a few minutes. I'm surprised when the phone rings very shortly after he had hung up.

I had actually signed a management agreement, a two-year commitment with Anthony Countey and this production company called Shake the Earth and without getting into all the technical minutia of it, this was at the same time that the Bad Brains had just released *I Against I*. We had this beautiful recording session underway and things are starting to look really rosy. We break for the holiday hiatus and then shortly after Christmas, my mom and dad had an altercation. My mom shot my dad and he died from the gunshot wounds. There weren't any witnesses. The D.A. in Wichita Falls, Texas wanted to bring her up on involuntary manslaughter charges. I had some advance funds in my personal bank account that I allocated to her legal defense. It took me several months to get her thoroughly disentangled from this murder rap. She claimed that she pulled this gun as a deterrent, that my dad was in this aggressive mode. They had not only gotten back together, they had remarried. All the kids had left the house and the two of them were caretakers for my grandmother, who had developed a pretty aggressive case of Alzheimer's and I think that that was exacerbating the stress factor in the household.

So, it's the twilight zone. I really had to kind of circle the wagons on my younger brothers and sisters, kind of get everybody soothed and on the same page. We're all adults at this point; it's not like there were any children involved. But it was the kind of situation where it really took a whole lot of internal family bonding to work through this incident. By the time the dust had started to settle on that and it was time for me to roll up my sleeves and get back to the business of this rock star business, I get back to New York to discover that there's an internal conflict that had manifested between my management firm and Jack Douglas' production company. To put it in a nutshell, when I got back, I was told that my management had filed counter-litigation against Jack Douglas' Waterfront Productions and that had put the entire project in stasis. The worst part about it for me was that nobody was talking to me. Nobody was sitting down telling me the truth. My production company had a substantial amount of funding that they had committed not just to me, but to Jack's production company. Jack had positioned himself to where he was going to bring this production to EMI under the auspices of his label. So he was still operating on a scheduled production budget. My managers were still giving him a certain modicum of financial input that he was going to share with the Record Plant. They weren't doing it on speculation and they definitely weren't doing it for free. One of the checks that they had issued to Jack had bounced and when Jack's financial people went back about this money this dispute ensued. They're going, like, no way that check bounced; we got the funds and the resources.

At this point Bevis takes me off the record to describe the complicated web of deceit that had sunk his recording deal.

At the core there was a whole bunch of hanky panky and cocaine-driven sexual activity afoot. It's rock and roll to the bone. I say, if you got to get shot down, make sure you get shot down in flames. Jack Douglas had gone back to EMI saying that if they ever tried to backdoor his production company with these tapes, that it was like a red flag, red light, do not pass go. That shit hit the zeitgeist and I've got eight tracks produced by Jack Douglas that I can't take to any other label in New York City.

For the year of 1987 going into 1988, 1988 going into 1989, my shit is locked up. *[He never got the tapes back.]* I've got outtakes from the production submasters. Through my exbandmates, I managed to recover some first-, second-, third-generation dubs from some of the submasters that we were using before we went into the final phase of mastering the record. I've got a few of those tracks posted on YouTube.

Living Colour gets signed in the winter of 1987. By 1988 their record *Vivid* comes out and it's not making a lot of noise at first, not until they get to the point where "Cult of Personality" drops. By the time that single is dropped, I've already moved to L.A. because now, my whole thing is getting myself disentangled from this litigation. I've gone all the way back to Hollywood to decompress from the shock and disappointment of all this bullshit. I'm on the borderline of committing suicide because I've worked my whole life to get in this position. I go from Wichita Falls, Texas to working with Jack Douglas in New York City in the fucking Record Plant and my record's not going to come out?

I've got a younger sister, three years younger than me; she was director of the Transit Department for the city of Santa Monica for the last 15 years. Her name is Stephanie Negriff. I explained to her what was going on. I get back to Los Angeles and my sister is like, "Look, I don't want you to worry; I don't want you to think. I just want you to sit down and collect your thoughts and think about what you want to do when you feel like doing something. I want you to just chill, just hibernate."

The happy ending to this story is called survival. It's called breathing and walking and having second, third, and fourth chances. And truth be told, it beats the hell out of all that dead rock star shit.

Stephanie and Bevis are the only two of Melvin and Navoline's children who are still living. Bevis has been married to his wife Kim (Evans) for twenty fulfilling years. They have no children. Bevis lives in Austin, where he continues to actively perform and runs Deux Voix, Ltd. As for his story of gripping personal tragedy and abruptly truncated fame, Bevis Griffin recounts it all with a stoic lack of bitterness or rancor. From all outward appearances he appears whole, even happy. He is a genuinely fun guy to kick it with.

From a musicological standpoint, it is interesting to speculate how history might have changed if his recording debut had not been torpedoed by litigated corruption and personal intrigue. Could Griffin's edgier version of androgynous black rock have displaced, redirected, or modified Prince's meteoric rise? Might the name Bevis Griffin have been added to the ranks of well-recognized musical luminaries with Lone Star roots like Ornette Coleman, Stevie Ray Vaughan or T-Bone Walker? Even Sly was born in Texas. Griffin is working on a memoir (featuring a forward by Vernon Reid) that may go a long way towards establishing his role as something of a missing link in a transitional period in American popular music. Within Texas, and mostly through his own tenacious efforts, Bevis has been written back into the musical annals of a state whose contributions have been as large as its outsized self-image. In 2010, supporters at the University of Texas facilitated Bevis' induction into the Texas Music Museum. As the state's first African-American hard rocker, he was indeed a lone star and Bevis' modest account of the way things went down largely undersells the blood and guts that his strike at pop star glory entailed. In the end, his relative obscurity might confirm, rather than refute, his singular place within the patchwork narrative of American modern music, and, of course, he is still making music.

But this is not that story. This is a simple story about colors and breathing, in and out—one holy breath at a time, gracefully, until that rhythm ceases and the colors have faded away.

