

# Dead Man's Curve

*The slow crash of the  
touring musician*

**Jason Heller**

**An hour outside of Reno, sliced by a two-lane highway, there's**

a stretch of nowhere that gets muddy when it snows. I've only been there once, but I know it well. The mud has stuck with me. On a winter morning in 2006, the stuff was everywhere: on my guitar, on my amplifier, on my bags, on my clothes, on my skin. And on the shattered windshield of the overturned van I'd just crawled out of.

It wasn't my first wreck. When I was three, my drunken parents swerved into oncoming traffic one night, narrowly missing a collision but winding up flipped in a ditch by the side of the road. I don't remember the accident. I was too young. Today, the scars on my face commemorate an event of which I have no memory.

I remember Reno. That morning, I wasn't in the backseat. I was riding shotgun. My band was on tour; our roadie Bailey was behind the wheel. Being from Virginia, she was understandably inexperienced at winter driving. But she was the one among us with the least brutal hangover, so she'd volunteered to kick off the mad, ten-hour dash to Portland for that night's show.

When the van skidded across the icy asphalt and began fishtailing, I told her everything was fine. Instead of becoming scared, she grew angry. Her anger turned to rage as the van started to spin, eventually skating backward, in the wrong lane, down the highway. As luck would have it, I again avoided what might have been a fatal collision with another vehicle, and just like when I was three, the vehicle flew off the highway, flipped, landed on its roof, and skidded several yards—through the grass, through the ice, through the mud—before coming to rest. I hung there, upside down, cocooned in my seatbelt. The echoes of Bailey's *fucks* and *goddamns* rang in my ears.

She and I unhooked our seatbelts. Gravity righted us. We kicked out the remnants of the windshield and crawled on all fours into the mud. Getting shakily to our feet, we walked around the side of the van, slid open the door, and made sure everyone else got out

okay. Aside from a few cuts and bruises, there were no injuries. We were covered in mud, and thankfully nothing else.

The last thing we removed from the van was our equipment. There was nowhere safe to put it. An ashy dusting of snowflakes fell around us as we pulled our guitars, amps, and bags from the back of the van and laid them out in the mud. After a phone call to the police, we matter-of-factly began discussing whether there was any way we might still make it to Portland in time for our show, or if we should cancel it and head straight for Seattle. Maybe, possibly, one of us dared to bring up, we might consider canceling the rest of the tour.

We sat there in silence, covered in ice and grease and mud, and thought on that.

The next day, we were headed back to Denver in a rental. I think one of us called the venues we were supposed to play on the West Coast, just to let them know we weren't going to make it, but I can't be sure.

**Countless bands have experienced road accidents while on** tour. The most famous is Metallica, whose soulful, prodigious bassist Cliff Burton died on a snowy strip of highway in rural Sweden in 1986 after he was thrown out of a tour bus window and then crushed by the vehicle as it flipped. Other excellent groups, not as well known, have been hobbled or extinguished by touring mishaps. The Exploding Hearts, an insanely gifted power-pop band, suffered an accident in 2003—while on their way to Portland, just like my band was three years later—that killed three of the four members. The Exploding Hearts had barely made their mark, and who knows what tuneful, anthemic classics they might have produced in the future. But of course the loss of life was far more terrible. The average age of the deceased was twenty-one.

Most recently, the progressive metal outfit Baroness were involved in a nightmarish tragedy. In August 2012 the band's bus careened off a viaduct in England, crashing through trees and then

into the ground thirty feet below. Everyone survived, but not without serious and potentially debilitating injuries—not to mention a haunting association with the working-musician lifestyle that runs far deeper than any choking-on-one’s-vomit stereotype. As Baroness’s singer-guitarist John Baizley recounts in a harrowing blog post about the accident:

There was one moment in the crash that cut me deeply. For one heartbeat and one tiny sliver of time, I became disconnected entirely. It was, specifically, the moment I impacted with the glass. In that barest heartbeat of a moment, I came face to face with the infinite. I didn’t see a light, or the tunnel, or hear any music. Nor did I get a “best-of” montage of my life. Instead, I felt the tip of my nose brush up against the very same fate I had accepted moments before. I looked into a cold, unreflective mirror. It was the dark, silent, dispassionate logic of the end.

I have no idea if Baizley is a J.G. Ballard fan, but the singer’s account of his accident could pass as a deleted page from the author’s 1973 novel *Crash*. Granted, *Crash* fixates on the pathological eroticization—the melding of flesh, metal, and velocity—of car wrecks, and there is no lust in Baizley’s recollection. Ballard, though, has long been an inspiration to songwriters, and numerous tunes have been composed under *Crash*’s influence—most notably David Bowie’s ghostly 1977 track “Always Crashing in the Same Car.” The song’s lyrics don’t seem to reference any specific accident (of Bowie’s or anyone else’s), but its opening couplet might as well be the touring musician’s mantra, rife with both ambition and risk: “Every chance, every chance that I take / I take it on the road.”

**In a sense, touring musicians as a whole are always crashing in the same car.** At this point in history, the tales of touring accidents have oozed together and homogenized into a mythic narrative, a postmodern motif, a legend that ironically grows more symbolic as

it's substantiated by mortality figures. Pop and rock have been built in part out of such sounds and rhythms, as much Detroit steel as Detroit soul. Just as the locomotive informed the rickety cadences and endlessly rolling verses of early twentieth-century folk, so did the rise of the postwar commuter class—sired by suburban sprawl and Eisenhower's interstate system—streamline popular music into a sleeker machine.

And a more dangerous one. Acknowledged by some as the first true rock 'n' roll song, Ike Turner's 1951 single "Rocket 88" was an ode to an Oldsmobile: "You may have heard of jalopies / You heard the noise they make / Let me introduce you to my Rocket 88." By 1964, the peak of teen drag-race songs, Jan and Dean's "Dead Man's Curve" had christened the intersection of rock rebellion and auto fatalities. With blood.

"Dead Man's Curve" is a turning point. While not remotely concerned with the roving life of a touring musician—a mundane topic that wouldn't enter into the lexicon of the rock canon until the genre had ostensibly grown up in the 1970s—the song eerily prophesied rock's continuous conflation of fast cars with gruesome death. (Not that the topic doesn't leave room for a little levity; in 1978, Buzzcocks, the pioneering punk band, released a song called "Fast Cars" that contains the subversively nerdish lines, "Sooner or later / You're gonna listen to Ralph Nader / I don't wanna cause a fuss / But fast cars are so dangerous.")

Of the morose tour songs of the 1970s, Bob Seger's "Turn the Page" is most famous. The song drearily and self-absorbedly catalogues the banal miseries of being a musician "on the road again," an existential stasis that most stars of the decade tended to glamorize. A dozen years after Cliff Burton's death on the highways of Sweden, Metallica faithfully covered "Turn the Page." But in Metallica's hands—and with Burton as an unnamed, spectral absence lurking amid the song's minor-key murk—lines like "As you're shaking off the cold / You pretend it doesn't bother you" take on a preternatural chill.

The fact is that touring is no longer a romantic prospect nor an indicator of success. As detailed in hundreds of blogs and articles over the past decade, the rise of illegal music downloads, the poor economy, and the disintegration of the music industry as a late twentieth-century apparatus of patronage have all combined to form a perfect storm: the low-to-mid-level musician of any genre has increasingly been forced onto the road. Ticket and merchandise sales—that is, merchandise other than physical manifestations of recorded music—are how the struggling musician makes her rent. But that rent covers a living space that is increasingly left vacant. The van becomes dining room, living room, kitchen, and front porch.

One group in recent years, a joyously perverse and inventive noise duo called Friends Forever, went so far as to actually perform in their van. The 2001 documentary *Friends Forever* parses like postapocalyptic science fiction; after driving to the next destination, the grubby and fuel-starved twosome, in a heavily foot-trafficked area, put on ridiculous costumes, fire up a small generator, open the van's side door, set off a smoke bomb, and begin pounding out a visceral racket on guitars, keyboards, drums, and whatever else can fit inside the vehicle's confines. The audience organically gathers to gawk and ideally donate a couple dollars to the band's *Mad Max-meets-Zappa* spectacle. The van is no longer a means of conveyance or mere shelter. It is the stage.

If there's a class of working person that today's touring musician can best relate to, it's the long-distance trucker. Forced to battle the withering elements—both external and internal—of the interstate, the two seemingly disparate groups are often indistinguishable at your average roadside truckstop. If anything, the trucker is cleaner, saner, and demonstrably better paid. Not that there's a particular kinship between trucker and musician—that is, unless you consider the subgenre of country music known as truck-driving country, trucker country, or simply truckmusic. One of the kings of truckmusic was Red Sovine, the raconteur-style speak-singer whose music probed, with a surprising sensitivity, the ever-changing emotional

geography of the trucker's paradoxical state of being: both sedentary and itinerant. The loneliness of Sovine's songs sometimes assumes a morbid form. In his 1967 hit "Phantom 309," a hitchhiker comes face to face with the ghost of a trucker who died in a self-sacrificial wreck; in his 1975 chart-topper "Teddy Bear," the innocuous title conceals an alternately heartrending and hair-raising tale of a dead trucker's son, paralyzed from the waist down, who maintains his link with the world by CB radio. In 1980—while visiting Nashville, where he frequently went to record and perform—Sovine suffered a heart attack. He was behind the wheel of his Ford van. The vehicle crashed, killing him instantly.

**Six years since my own van accident, I find myself not dwelling** on it much. Then again, I have little reason to. I haven't toured since. There is one thing that reminds me of it, though: a song. As any musician who's been on tour will tell you, whoever rides shotgun in the van gets to pick the music being played in the stereo; it's just one of the many protocols and rituals among traveling musicians that have been handed down like folk melodies. The morning of the wreck, I had popped in a CD by a defunct post-hardcore band called Cap'n Jazz. The song "Oh Messy Life" was playing when the van began its sidelong skid into oblivion. Grimly, I recalled in a flash that Cap'n Jazz's guitarist Davey Von Bohlen, whom I'd gotten to know personally, had suffered a near-fatal van wreck while on tour with his subsequent band, The Promise Ring. I wondered if this was truly what was happening to me.

The moment the van flipped, I had no sense of the infinite. As weightlessness overcame us, as those tons of steel and glass and plastic began to whirl around with my body strapped within, I felt nothing. No fear, no worry, no sacred nothingness; just a matter-of-fact assessment of my current position in space and time, an erasure of emotion that John Baizley of Baroness seems to have shared. Maybe it was shock. Maybe it was the embrace of the inevitable that I'd long pondered, ever since I was a little boy and first understood,

as much as anyone of any age can, that life is finite, and therefore you should fill it with as many things that bring you comfort as you can.

Like music.

Today, whenever “Oh Messy Life” pops up in my iPod, those last few seconds of nullity before the van’s impact with the earth come flooding back to me. They didn’t frighten me then, but they do now. It amazes and horrifies me that I ever subjected myself to that perverse and contradictory kind of life—the immobility within movement, the confinement within freedom. The stale air of vans and bars, with the plains and mountains and oceans just a thin wall away. Then I remember: I did it because I love playing music.

And on those days I pick up my guitar, plug it in, and strum a few of the old songs, even smiling sometimes as I notice the dried streaks of highway mud that still cling to the sides of my amplifier.

The romance of the musician’s life isn’t easy to let go of, despite its dwindling returns. Like any who have braved the changing tides of writing, design, or other professional forms of creative expression in the past couple decades, musicians have been forced to find new ways to thrive. The working models that evolved slowly throughout the last century now outpace the metabolism of aesthetics itself.

It’s a curious position to be in. Commerce has always been a fickle variable in the artist’s life, but now the means of artistic production and distribution—touring included—have become almost frighteningly neutral. Licensing one’s music for advertising or television, journeyman session playing, work-for-hire commissions, short-term contracts, residencies, sponsorships, merchandising, crowd-sourcing, teaching on the side: All have risen in prominence to play larger roles in the musician’s toolbox. “Play hard, tour hard, and look for your big break” hasn’t become obsolete, but it’s no longer the default plan. In fact, there is no plan.

The *laissez-faire* playing field is crippling to some, but it’s liberating to others. Why tour when you can scrape together a modest living playing in your own town—perhaps even by playing in a cover

band or two, a tactic that younger, cooler musicians once looked down on but now consider more and more acceptable? Leasing music out for commercial use was also once seen as distasteful, and for good reason: It can demean the art and link it forever with hamburgers, dog food, or cheap insurance. But now, at best, that kind of ethical posture is seen as a luxury that most musicians can no longer afford. At worst, the no-sellout stance is considered specious.

I came of age in a musical environment supercharged with ethical lightning, and I bottled it inside myself, for better and for worse. When the iconic post-hardcore band Fugazi took strong positions and practices against marketing itself, merchandising its likeness, charging high prices for records and tickets, and singing about anything other than issues of earnest, urgent importance, I was of the age when that kind of crusading spirit spoke to me—and when it was workable within its subcultural and socioeconomic context. That was the early 1990s. But the sea change that came from the alternative movement of that decade fed directly into the democratization of music in the 2000s, and we now live in its inchoate aftermath. Disorder ensues after revolution; opportunists and demagogues thrive, while others struggle to maintain the integrity of the revolution's founding principles.

Falling more in the latter camp, I've opted to drop out. Some friends around me, who grew up in the same music scene I did, have adapted. They play numerous shows every week—in town or on very short (and relatively safe) regional tours—and supplement their incomes repairing guitars or running soundboards at local clubs. I can't say music didn't give me a bridge to my current livelihood. I began writing because I loved music so much. It wasn't enough that I played it. I had to opine on it, and I wanted to do so at length, and I wanted an audience for it. Reviewing local CDs for my town's alt-weekly paper led to writing about larger topics, editing, and ultimately becoming a novelist.

I still have the urge to play music, though. In front of people. To share it, to show off, to unburden my soul, to sleep soundly after a

half-hour set of screaming my fucking lungs out. That combination is encoded in a ritual imprinted on me by a mom who loved radio and a TV full of videos. So every once in a great while, I climb back up on stage and crank it up. When I do it, though, I'm never that far from home. Some nights, I pack up my guitar, say goodbye to my audience full of friendly faces and neighbors, and walk home.