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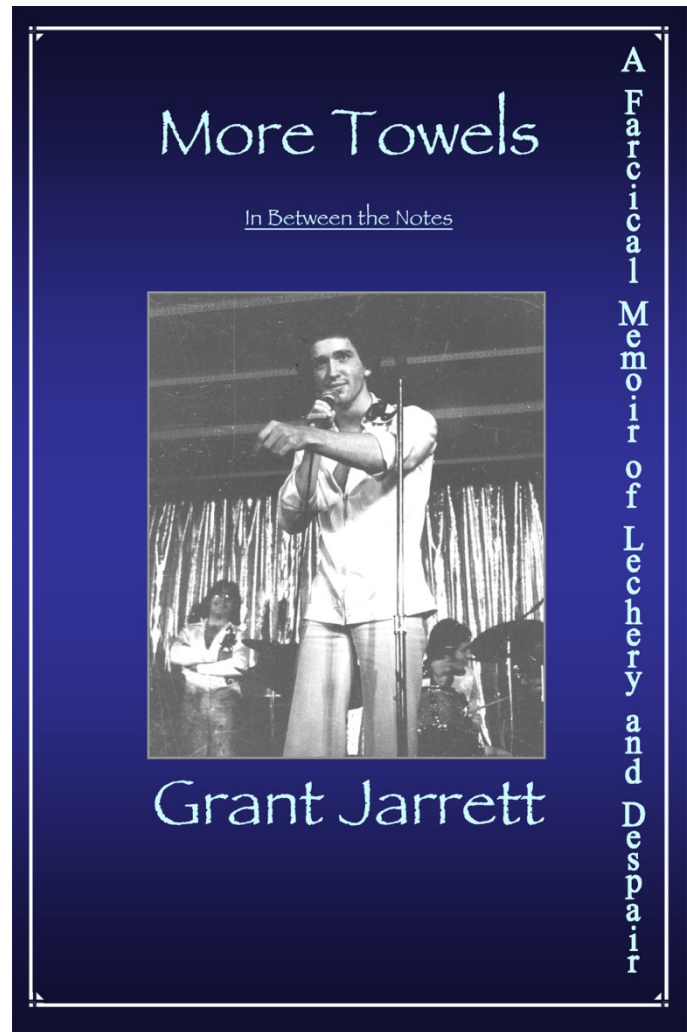
More Towels

In Between the Notes

Don't Worry That it's Not Good Enough for Anyone Else to Hear...

When I began playing music for a living I was very young, and not very good; fortunately, at that time and place, talent was not a critical requirement. Although I did appear to have some unrefined natural ability, what was far more important to prospective employers, was that I was tractable and reasonably presentable. And I was willing to work cheap. By the age of fifteen, I'd played at high school dances, love-ins, college fraternity parties, resort hotels, battles of the bands, and mostly in a great variety of garages in Northeastern Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains. And in the winter of my seventeenth year I went on the road.

The first group with which I was unfortunate enough to travel was a self-contained show-band led by Fred Waring Jr., a recovering alcoholic, and the eldest son of the had-been bandleader and blender inventor whose limited celebrity dissolved in the nineteen-fifties almost as swiftly as it had materialized in the forties. Fred's third wife, Rochella, was the featured singer, and there was a mediocre comedy team consisting of two beyond middle-age weasels who tried hard (though never quite hard enough) to be another Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, and got along just about as well. Alex Gergar played Hammond organ, Tom Perkins played electric bass, and my older brother, Scott, who sang backup in the shows and lead in the dance sets, played electric and acoustic guitars. The handsome bandleader, when he deigned to play at all, was a surprisingly proficient trombonist. And yes, there is such a thing.



We were probably no worse, and possibly a little better than some of the other bands on the same circuit. But actually, now that I think of it, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe we were worse. Yes, I think we were. In any case, we were a strange crew, ranging in age from seventeen to fifty-five and clad every night in matching burgundy three-piece velvet suits and ruffled white shirts. I believe we were billed as *The Fred Waring Junior Show, featuring the comedy team of Dick Chase and Bud Mitchell and Starring Rochella York*. This, though, was almost thirty years ago, so if I have misspelled a name or two, I almost sincerely apologize.

The first stop on the unwieldy ensemble's first and only road trip was *The Hawaiian Cottage*, a nightclub in Cherry Hill, New Jersey that was garishly adorned with imitation bamboo and lush plastic tropical fruits and flowers. A regular at the gaudy nightclub, and the act with whom we shared the stage in alternate sets, was an ostensibly Hawaiian, sword-swallowing fire-eater—a tall, broad-chested and very friendly fellow who taught me some card tricks that I still occasionally perform when I want to clear a room.

I don't recall much about our first week in Cherry Hill, but during the second week of our two-week engagement my mother came to hear us, bringing with her my pretty fifteen-year-old "Junior Miss" girlfriend, Jackie Bunninger. Jackie was (with the exception of an awkward one-night-stand in room 222 of the Minisink Hills Holiday Inn, where in a drunken frenzy I clumsily mauled the still-shod daughter of Dotty Dodgin, an unexceptional wreck of a pseudo-jazz drummer who had happily supplied us with the Cold Duck I guzzled and the pot her teenaged daughter smoked to get us in the "mood," and was, I assume, getting stoned with her ear to the floor in room 322, one floor above us) the first girl with whom I ever had sex. In spite of her father's apparent (and probably understandable) antipathy for me, Jackie had somehow arranged to stay overnight in New Jersey—an unexpected pleasure, for me, if for no one else. Thanks Mom.

Our engagement at *The Hawaiian Cottage* was intended as a paid rehearsal, an opportunity to fine-tune our fledgling act and expand our limited repertoire before moving on to some other dump. As it turned out, it was also the beginning of some ugly battles between Fred and Rochella, Dick and Bud, Dick and Bud and Fred and Rochella, and Rochella and the band, and on and on and on and on, and if the magnitude of the talent in that menagerie had approached five percent of the magnitude of the conceit, we would all be rich and famous and I would have had to change the names you've almost certainly never heard before and undoubtedly never will again. Unless they sue me.

Although Rochella was tall and fairly attractive, and was blessed with a pair of prominent high-slung breasts, she had about as much sex appeal, even to a horny teenager, as a mildewed scrubbing sponge, and she possessed a thin, piercing voice that, whether she was speaking or singing, was always just a few irksome degrees north of where it should have been—a voice that was sharp in every sense of the word. Because we understood why the well-assembled wife of the bandleader was there,

most of us begrudgingly accepted her. Dick and Bud seemed to feel no compulsion to treat her particularly well, but the rest of us were constrained to endure our frustration and shame in relative silence.

At times, those first weeks, when it was just the quartet performing dance sets comprised of top-forty hits with a smattering of my brother's increasing repertoire of original material sneaked in, it was fun, and even exciting. We were learning, like paid apprentices, to be musicians and entertainers, and we were learning about another kind of life. The shows, on the other hand, were painful and embarrassing, in spite of the endless, tense rehearsals. Finally, after two weeks in New Jersey, we set out toward Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, North America, Earth, where we were booked in a newly opened nightclub, the name of which I have happily forgotten.

So ...

While my brother and I plowed through the blinding blizzard that blanketed nearly half the nation, in his drafty, dilapidated, red Ford Falcon convertible, Alex and Tom, who had departed hours before us, were creeping along in Fred's sputtering two-tone Volkswagen van, overloaded with instruments and amplifiers. Fred and Rochella struggled through the icy mess at six gallons per mile and about as many miles per hour in their ponderous green and beige Winnebago. But the alleged comedians, who were being paid more than any of us for doing far less work just about as well, flew first-class—an early slap in the face of my still-innocent notions of justice.

Confident that we were making good time despite the inclement weather, Scott and I forged ahead, stopping only for bathrooms, food, and fuel until we arrived at the Canadian border, where the grim uniformed officers of the border patrol had already disassembled the Volkswagen Van and most of its contents in an enthusiastic but ultimately futile search for contraband fruits and vegetables. When they'd finally finished tearing our vehicles apart and interrogating us, it was so late that we missed our own opening night. I think they were just having a good time—impotent little men, feeling momentarily powerful. I hated them.

And so it was well after midnight when those of us who'd been apprehended at the border finally arrived at the club. What we soon learned was that Fred and Rochella were still in transit somewhere in the heart of the worsening storm. But Dick and Bud were waiting on an empty stage with the disgruntled club owner, Jimmy Ginakis, whose name I recall only because I referred to him, in his absence, of course, as Jimmy Gymnastics. We had already finished unloading our equipment, setting up the stage, and performing a sound-check when, late in the early morning, with the snow still spiraling down, Fred and his wife finally materialized, cold and weary, and just in time to apologize to Jimmy and get us all checked in to our rooms.

The downtown hotel where we were registered was clean and comfortable, and each of us had his own private room, which, as I would later learn, was an unusual luxury for traveling musicians. But there was one other notable peculiarity: there were strip shows

on the small stage in the cafeteria-style restaurant three times a day. There was the lunch stripper, the dinner stripper, and the late night extravaganza, which consisted of both the lunch stripper *and* the dinner stripper. I had never before seen anything like this, and initially could not believe my good fortune. It was during my first lunchtime striptease, however, that I discovered that there was something less than erotic about watching a slightly plump though vaguely attractive youngish woman clumsily disrobing and changing her own 45s mid-strip, while I, surrounded by a gaggle of sweating, hungry lechers, dug sleepily into an overdone burger and greasy brown fries. The only exciting aspect of the situation was the knowledge, or at least the optimistic belief, that the strippers too were staying there in my hotel, perhaps on my very floor. Every night, as I paced down the hall toward my room, I would hope to run into one of them, though I doubt now that I would have known quite what to do or say if I had.

Nevertheless, although this was only the beginning of my life on the road, I was rapidly becoming an exceedingly lustful young man. And in addition to the unrealizable temptation of the in-house strippers, there were the beautiful, long-legged, short-skirted waitresses in the club, the tallest and most beautiful of whom I fucked repeatedly in my bed and in the shower—at least in my more implausible masturbatory fantasies. I had become sexually active only a couple years before, but now, with the barrage of stimulation surrounding me, my overzealous libido was frighteningly alert. The music, such as it was, was virtually irrelevant. And it deserved to be. Still, we somehow survived our four-week stay in Winnipeg, and were even invited to return at some unspecified time in the future. For some inexplicable reason, they liked us. Cretins.

The band's next stop, following a far less dramatic border crossing and a much calmer drive, was a sprawling compound in Burlington, Iowa called *The Pizzaz-a-torium*. I'm not making this up. The entire multi-level "entertainment complex" was owned and managed by the wealthy family who also owned the leading antenna manufacturing company in the U.S., Burlington's single largest employer. It occurs to me only now that they may not be doing so well now that cable and satellite dishes and cable have taken over the civilized world. Oh well.

Burlington is situated in the lower right hand corner of the state, very close to the Illinois border and not terribly far from Missouri. It is, or was, I thought, a very typical midwestern town. Most everyone owned a pickup truck or two, they all talked and moved a little more slowly than I was accustomed to, and all of the females over the age of fourteen had husbands or children, though seldom both. My time there is mostly a blur, with a few exceptions: I remember missing Jackie and calling her from my room almost every night, I remember learning how to appreciate alcohol, and I remember driving over the Illinois border to purchase beer late one night with some girls we'd somehow picked up in Burlington. I slept with the cute little fifteen year old I met that night, and in the morning I recognized what I had dimly suspected in my drunken stupor the night before: she was exceedingly pregnant. At least I could be relatively certain there was no husband to come gunning for me in his pickup truck.

After our adventure in Burlington, much of which has been permanently obscured by the indescribable discomfort I felt for so many reasons that morning in Iowa, we headed back to Pennsylvania to regroup and decide on the future, if any, of our group.

And I was glad to be going home.

But ...

Immediately upon our return to the Poconos, Fred supplied us—the rhythm section—with a list of songs to learn for the dance sets, one of which was The Carpenters' saccharine hit, *Sing a Song*. While our leader and his screeching wife relaxed or bickered on some warm beach, the four of us rehearsed with impressive regularity, but though we tried, we simply couldn't bring ourselves to learn that one deplorable song. I guess we had some integrity, or maybe it was just the capacity for shame, which by that time had already been getting plenty of exercise. But when we expressed to Fred our aversion to that nauseating melody, he continued to stubbornly insist, from his comfortable distance, that we learn it. Demoralized, my brother and I staged a bloodless coup. We went off on our own with Alex and Tom, leaving the overpaid deadwood behind.

The Jarrett Brothers' Band worked sporadically in and around the Poconos for several months and *The Fred Waring Junior Show* was just an embarrassing stain on our collective history. And we never had to play that moronic song, some of whose lyrics seemed, and still seem, so mockingly apt. And I quote: "Don't worry that it's not good enough for anyone else to hear ... just sing ... "

Ugh.