

OXBOW / Tour Diary/ Europe: 1998

We are Oxbow. A San Francisco Band. The press uses words like "harrowing," "intense," and "mind-bending" to describe our music. That is when they are not using words like "suck." All told, all tours combined, we have played close to 100 shows in Europe. Recently, we just played 17 shows in 4 countries in 3 weeks in our fourth tour of Europe. Touring as an offering to the great and mighty whoregod of rock and roll gets you into the id of a country in a way that no other type of traveling does. I'm not saying driving 10 hours from smoky night club to smoky night club is the best way to see a country. I'm just saying that if it's sin, vice, excess, and general strangeness you are looking for, you're likely to find it, like Strother Martin was wont to say, Riot Ceeha.



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Day 1: Fucked by Lufthansa

Here we go again. Tour time, like tea time, a potentially pointless tradition that we do for reasons largely unknown to us. Oh, of course, the label pundits will point to things like record sales and use those long pointed things to point at chalk boards that are supposed to contain sales graphs but which in reality contain signals and ciphers that were they to be decoded would probably all say the same thing: Steal their money. But we have a bitchin' record *Serenade in Red* to sell, as well as a reissue of our first two records, and so we are easily persuaded. Besides there are worse places to be than Italy, France, Belgium, or Germany in May...Italy, France, Belgium, or Germany in November for instance, but we tain't going to complain. Translation: We are going to complain as much as we can and the flight over is a good place to start.

Lufthansa, benefitting from our willingness to believe in national stereotypes, has a reputation as being the number one on-time airline because by proxy we largely believe Germans to be punctual destroyers of religious minorities. We reserve our special western ridicule instead for airlines like Air Peru or Air Lagos. We are fools.

A Brief List of Lufthansa's Crimes Against Humanity (Generally) and Oxbow (Specifically):

- 1) A plane with six flat tires

- 2) No replacement tires for the six flat tires
- 3) A canceled flight (if it's canceled it's not "late," eh?)
- 4) Food poisoning (going and coming back)
- 5) Rancorous flight crew
- 6) "Would you like a window seat?" Yes. And in reality the seat was? You got it...the middle of the center row.
- 7) Copious amounts of mystery fluids leaking from the plane onto several rows of passengers and the most severe crime of them all...
- 8) The complete and total loss of 40 lbs, 30 t-shirts, 300 booklets (a percentage of our tour merchandise), and my luggage. In all fairness they did provide me with an Emergency Kit that included two Q-tips, a t-shirt, and shaving cream. I was going to cut a dashing figure in that t-shirt with the shaving cream loin cloth. Yow!

From Frankfurt to Thun

We go to a place called Club Mokka in the scenic Swiss mountain village of Thun. We declared a moratorium on playing Switzerland this tour. We always make money here but being that most of the clubs are state supported this means nothing. This is a nation of people who fuck in the dark, are afraid of their own shadows, and complain overly much about having to see my penis in the odd moment when I happen to have it in my hand and am furiously masturbating on stage. Plus we are collectively still kind of pissed off by this Nazi gold thing. But we decide to sleep in Thun since it is clear, as a result of my 22 hour flight from New York (I am also a minister and was in New York performing a wedding ceremony...no shit) that we will not make Italy tonight.

We decide to go by Club Mokka to see if it makes sense to do a quick set (and also to meet our host). The pot smoke is thick (always a bad sign...especially in a country that's super passive to begin with) and a murmur moves through our ranks, "Mono!" In tour short hand this refers to a club that we went to in Duisberg, Germany, whose motto we decided could have easily been, "Music, Men, and Das Blinking Lights." It would have been fine had these men been gay, meaning there would have been a reason for their being there, but they were not. These places were where hope went to die.

Single, straight guys stoned beyond repair clustered around and ardently wished someone with a vagina would show up to enjoy the plinking and plonking of their wonderful techno genius Aphex Twin (a guy who I suspect is much like them).

The dance floor at Club Mokka was empty. Groups of men along the wall. And of course, Das ubiquitous Blinking Lights.

We have already decided against playing but our intrepid tour manager, Manual, who is Swiss himself, perseveres and drags us into the sanctum sanctorum of the 45 year old club administrator and promoter. He is a big, unshaven man with a shock of unruly hair and is dressed in early Renaissance Faire: lots of scarves and sandals. He carries some

sort of custom made lunch box that he flips open to reveal a bong, which he proceeds to load up and smoke, huge clouds of pot smoke mixing with the effluvia of smells emanating from the man.

"You can play if you want."

We don't want and don't know how to say it with him right there.

"But the kids..."

Anyone who talks about "the kids" is an asshole.

"...smoke too much pots and don't come. Pots has destroyed them."

We tell him we are really too tired to play to the 15 stoned men scattered about beautiful Club Mokka but that we "really dug your scene. Especially the lights," and so maybe next time. We vamoose it to our host Michael's house, thankful and praying to four different gods for rescuing us from what surely must have been the butcrack of all Swiss club experiences. Down the stairs to our waiting van (a mighty Ford Transit 1 Diesel that seated six and slept one) we notice promo photos on the wall--Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, Come, DJ Spooky, Lydia Lunch (our good friend)... all big american bands -- and I think of the promoter and flies and spiders. We escaped with our souls intact.

Our host Michael plays drums in two big Swiss bands, Alboth and 16-17, and is actually a state-funded Swiss artist and a damned nice guy who wears socks with about 14,000 holes in them. His apartment is on the top floor (this is a recurring theme from our last tour where every place we ever stayed was on the top floor, no elevator, no matter what) and over looks a lake and the Swiss Alps and is beautiful and we sit on his balcony and eat bread and garlic and listen to music. I ask him if he knows much about yodeling. He smiles and says, "No." Decent fella. On to Italy.

Italy? Genius!

Every now and then reality succeeds in outpacing your wildest expectations. From beginning to end Italy did that. The hand waving, the cinzano drinking, the well-coiffed boulevardiers, cafe society, the whole bit, just like the movies and more. If we had a video camera and passed off what we had seen as a new MTV "reality show" there'd be letters about broadly drawn stereotypes. But Italy was big like Texas is big, except it is heart and not land that express its size. Our first show is in Faenza, a little south of Bologna, at a club called Club Destino. Destino is run by Morena, a woman we all fall deeply and chastely in love with (another recurring theme: falling in love with the people who cook us food). She cooks and cooks and cooks and we eat and eat and eat. Hardcore meat eater that I am I don't even mind that she is a vegetarian and that she offered me cat food when

I asked for meat and I didn't even give her a hard time for feeding her cat catfood with meat.



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The club is packed and making my way through to the stage I'm intercepted by what I would come to discover were our supremely smooth Sicilian tour agents Pietro and Massimiliano.

"Eugene?"

Not knowing who they were I cautiously say, "Ah, maybe."

"It is me, Massimo."

I stick out my hand to shake his hand and he slaps my hand away and hugs me tight. I laugh and say hello.

Pietro says "What about meself?" and I hug him too.



The show is great, people are into it, but let me start off by telling you that first of all, I do not drink. Teetotaler. Have been for the last 19 years. I didn't have a problem of the 12 step variety. Fanaticism just embraced me. However under the counsel of esteemed travel writer Richard Sterling, I was urged to drink some of the best wine in Europe, Italian wine, if I got a chance. It was the custom. When in Italy it is customary to drink good Italian wine. It seems that it is also customary to drink the Schnapps-like Grappa. And of course it must not be forgotten, La Birra De Lupo, or The Beer of Wolves. It thusly become the custom after enjoying all of these other customs to serve as an ambassador of exceedingly good will by performing sans pants, falling down a lot, and involving the audience in a sobbingly intense conversation about the viability of a Mussolini candidacy and never mind that he's dead. After the show Massimo hands me a cassette tape of several Mussolini's speeches. Completely brilliant.

The next day we magically after two hours of phone calls find my Lufthansa lost luggage in Florence. The rest of the band heads off to Orbetello, about 100 kilometers north of Rome and Pietro takes me on a side trip to Florence to find my bags in a room full of lost luggage, 90 percent of which was from Lufthansa flights. We get the bag and decide to see a little of the wonderful city of Florence. We see an Italian car accident (hand waving galore) which was worth the price of admission alone and an adult bookstore, since I was wanting some fine Italian literature and then on to the show at the well named club NonDiMeno, Italian for Nonetheless. We get there right in time for dinner and the eating

starts again. We take our meal at this place called Africa, some sort of freaky theme parked KOA place in the middle of the woods where a guy dressed in Daktari gear and a pith helmet opens the gate and lets us drive in. Tiki lights guide the way. I expect our waitress will be topless and wearing a grass skirt but this might be wishful thinking. The meateaters consume copious amounts of salccicia, or sausage, and we leave Africa with a fine sheen of pig grease on our faces, which is how we play the show. Midway through the set, so happy to have gotten meat, I break into a version of a traditional Italian sing-along song by Sergio Franchi called Eh Cumpari! It was a big hit, the show, the whole bit. We are pretty pleased with ourselves until I notice again that I am without pants.



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Our two gentlemen from Sicily, princes among men, take their leave, hugs and kisses all around, and mumble something about getting back to Rome and take off with a couple of completely beautiful 20 year olds that we are quick to notice, they did not show up with. We begrudge them nothing though as we believe that it is largely due to their sage patronage that we manage to avoid being ripped off in Italy. We drive back past Africa and sleep in this slick Pensione and wake up with chickens, roosters, and cows outside of our window. It is about 75 degrees out and a gentle breeze moves through our rooms. I'd kill myself to be able to stay here but on to Imperia.



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Imperia is on the Ligurian Sea, also known as the Tirreanean, which further south becomes the Mediterranean. We stay at another great hotel and play a scorchingly intense show to an absolutely crazy crowd of 30. Like Dukowski at SST, our US label says, "It ain't their fault no one else shows up," so we play centered and do a good job and afterward the people buy our Cds and t-shirts and we will leave Italy tomorrow with over

2 million lira in our pockets, which is about 2 American dollars. I'm joking. Because of my pants stunts and on account of me not knowing where the hell they are half the time I'm not allowed to carry any of the money. We are sad to be leaving but duty calls and so ON TO FRANCE!

The Butcher of Lyon

We tore through Cote D'Azur, Cannes, Monaco, and St. Tropez where that damned song kept haunting my waking moments Ban De Soleil for the St. Tropez tan. Our entire reality is formed by American tv commercials. And of this we are ashamed. They are gearing Cannes up for the soon to be arrived film festival where people dressed in black from LA will show up and ruin everything. Having renounced modern motion pictures I hold forth again about how though movies are art, actors are simple craftspeople and not artists since artists create something from nothing and actor's just reproduce what writer's have written and we should punish them anyway by not seeing their movies. Titanic pushed me over the edge though I haven't seen it. The idea of it was enough. The City of Angels pissed me off as well since it was a better Wenders film. And the cherry on top was, of course, my self-loathing for having a speaking role in Bill Cosby's Leonard Part 6, it must be said, one of the worst movies of all time. In any case we make it through to Lyon where luck and circumstance had us finding the elusive Nazi war criminal cleverly disguised as a butcher having a cigarette break in front of his butcher shop. The proper authorities have been notified.



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But in Lyon we play in a club called Pez Ner. The name is not connected to the candy at all, but to some quote from Antonin Artaud who, all of my best sources say, is some dead French guy. But this place is a great space, so great that it seems to be the kind of place that they show in the movies when they want to show a place that cool, wild people go. We played their first show ever as a club in 1996 and we're glad to be back. Greg, our drummer, in what is to become a recurring theme looks around and says "Yup. THIS is the one. Not a person in the house tonight. My prediction." Drummers it seems are universally negative about this kind of thing. Maybe it is having to watch the audience. I have to watch the audience too and I don't have a whole drum set to hide behind but I don't complain. Possibly because I'm dissociating badly enough to believe that I'm playing a stadium every night, who knows? But not only will this show be videotaped and professionally recorded, they are also running a live simulcast on the Internet, so if we die tonight, it will be a death that will echo thousands of miles.



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There is a band called Bedhead opening for us. They are on a big and cool label in the states. Our label in the states, SST Records, is pretty big but every time I mention their name some wag will invariably say something like "are they still around?"

This annoys the fuck out of me and is probably payback for when I met Tommy and Pamela Lee at Hustler Magazine's 20th Anniversary Party and told them that "I liked the new Motley Crue record and I don't care what everybody else says!"

But Bedhead suit their name and listening from the apartments above the club where the bands stay I'm drifting off when Dan, our bassist, walks in and says casually, "The club is packed." And so it is. William Rage, an American friend of ours, is there and the show is rocker-rific. Watching the video later I watch myself doing the fuck walk, screwing the air, and jamming audience members faces in my crotch. This, I believe, is no way for a grown man to act.

After the show we are back upstairs and dinner is served: big medallions of pork, pork, pork. I'm talking to the genius artist Marie-Claire Cordat, a French painter, collageur, photog, and performance artist in the Karen Finley mode. My French is bad to nonexistent but her english is good enough for it to make sense that we're talking to each

other. She tells me a story about her mother drowning kittens and the lateness of the evening, the medallions of pork, and the red wine I am consuming are causing my eyes to get caught in her eyes leaving me quite sure I'm on the verge of being killed. Nothing she's actually saying mind you, but I just start thinking, "well, you know, she could kill me." and from there to "well, why wouldn't she kill me," and finally on to "well, I'd kill me if I had the chance." William Rage breaks the spell as he and his girlfriend Annalisa who I'm predicting, regardless of how hopelessly in love with her he is, will end up destroying him, asks me to sell him something. I go to sell him something, pass out, and wake early the next morning. Marie-Claire Cordat is gone, I imagine she is pissed off at me but for what I do not know. It is a beautiful day and we are off to Lille, where as our luck would have it, there is a citywide strike. Hurrah for socialism and the 13 hour work week!!!

Gay and Black in Lille

Pervasive dog shit aroma that disappears when the day cools. The show is in a damp and musty basement bottom club-like catacombs. The erstwhile French resistance met in places like this, caught pneumonia and died before firing a single shot, blowing up a bridge or appearing on Hogan's Heroes. The city IS crippled by a strike. It is also large enough so that this will matter, says the promoter, "people can't bike here." Greg says "THIS is the one. Empty house. Guaranteed."



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By show time there are two people in the house. We talk amongst ourselves and decide to play a song for every person in the house, all two, get the fuck off and go to the hotel in the hopes of catching some porno for our cross-cultural anthropological studies of sex practices in France (Do the women do the hula dance? Do they not wear under pants?). We instruct Manuel, our tour manager to take a photo so that people can see what being an international rock star looks like. While he's fumbling with the camera and we are playing our second song, a few more people show up and so we play them songs as well. Then a few more. We eventually play to 30 people. Being pros that we are we play our asses off to the intrepid ones who made it. Oh yeah, that and the money.

After the show a friend of Marie-Claire Cordat shows up. I ask if she hates me, still riffing on the possibility of my murder and he says, "no, she likes you." Then he thinks for a bit and asks me "What are your lyrics about?" and before I can answer that he

should buy the CD, my standard reply, he asks, "Are they about how tough it is to be black and gay?" I smile graciously and advise him to buy a CD with lyrics and he could find out for himself. But I wonder about what kind of song that would be: I'm black...doot doot doot...I'm gay...doot doot doot...it's TOUGH!" And then finish with a flourish of doot doot doot's? I'll figure it out. On to Nantes.

Nantes-y Boys

We feel a great show coming on, despite the fact that we are about to be reamed by another vegetarian cook. Despite the pending forced consumption of vegetables we are excited (the two vegetarians in the group most of all). The support crew and club staff are excited too, like kids--slapboxing with each other, talking to us whenever they get a chance, touching us--almost more Italian than the Italians. Niko, our guitarist is even doing his "I'm excited dance" during sound check. I actually hear someone say after hearing my name, "Enchante." After a while all of this good-natured bon homie begins wearing on me. These guys are a little too happy, healthy and sane. I figure out that this is because they are 21 years old on average. I figure this out when we are loading into Pannonica Cafe Jazz and I comment on a bum sleeping on the steps in front of the swanky Jazz center above the club. "Oh, an Oxbow fan!" One of the support staff actually says, "Oh, yeah. Poor guy. We let him into the shows sometime." I tell him, "what are you? Feeling sorry for him? Listen you want to feel sorry for somebody you feel sorry for ME, okay? That guy gets in free, he's happy. I'M the one who is suffering, friend."

He looks at me with a look that says "you poor sick sad old American fool," and I feel a little better.

The show is cool and we have about 198 people in the house plus the freeloaders (see above). Manuel pops in the Mussolini tape as we come walking out for the second encore and as a crowd roar goes up on the tape, so it does from our audience. I start breaking with reality and imagine for a second that I am the great pantsless Mussolini and when I look in the audience their eyes are aflame. Later we do an interview for some magazine and then head to Hotel Terminus. I suspect Klaus Barbie might be in residence here. The great search continues.

Socialism and a Sack of Weed

Never trust a potsmoking socialist. Not that they are inherently untrustworthy but their priorities are VERY different even before you factor in the passivity inducing evil weed. The promoter, in this instance, Phillippe has a quirky sense of humor and he has an interesting habit of shrugging his shoulders and smiling. Especially in answer to the question, "How many people do you expect tonight?"

He smiles and shrugs again and says, "What does it matter? You're staying in the best hotel in town!" Oh oh. And hence the miracle of state-sponsored art: if no one shows up the band STILL gets paid and naturally stays in the best hotel in town.

This is in marked contrast to the american promoter who is compulsively driven to absolutely, positively short you on some money (even if it is only \$5) AND you've sold the place out.

This show therefore seems to be a simple proposition but we are egomaniacs who would rather play in front of people than make a lot of money and this show is starting to give me the heebies...as in jeebies. Greg says, "This is it. I can feel it. We will play to a club more empty than a really empty place."

But the club is completely posh and the staff treats us impeccably. The dinner meal is great and Phillipe is great company, letting us use their slick computers, phones, setting us up with vodka, wine, towels and so forth. And when we hit the stage, I guess there about 80 people in the house. I still haven't figured out what's weird and don't until the middle of the second song: we are playing in the pot-smoking socialist equivalent of Stepford. People politely applaud, huff a few muggles, roll some bones, torch a doob and at the end call us out for an encore. We do not encore. It all feels strangely like, Manuel says, "Switzerland." There's something about having everything and having to work for nothing (a lot like large chunks of America) that dulls the edge. Either that or the pot. Or that we suck (always a possibility...we'd be the last to know). Anyway, I find myself feeling very sleepy and through the haze I hear Phillipe say, "Let's get you back to your hotel...."

Patron Saint of Good Meat

Saint-Etienne, a thriving metropolis, somewhere the hell in France. We are driving crookedly around some big sports arena place where the signs seem to indicate World Cup soccer events will be held when we see someone waving their arms wildly at us off in the distance. We recognize her as being part of the group (The Mad Collectif!) that put on our '96 show here. But the place she's waving at us from looks like the Cow Palace and we are sure she's been posted here to tell us how to get to the "real" club. Much to our surprise, shock, and chagrin, we are indeed playing this rock palace. Greg is convinced again that THIS will be the show that sucks.



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A french band called Baton is opening up, an american band, Chokebore, on one of those cool labels that nobody laughs at (unlike our label) is playing next and we have the dubious distinction of headlining.

I say dubious because sometimes headlining can quickly just turn into "playing last," especially if it could be said, everybody was there to see the band before you. In any case we are anxious and Chokebore, who have been out on the road for the last few months and showing it, add to our anxiety by immediately, almost as soon as we step from our van, begin fighting with each other and their highly huffy austrian soundman named Sascha.



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Two of the guys are brothers and this seems to be reflected in their bickering as they fight like only people who really love each other fight...with acid, vitriol, and complete hatred and conviction. Their fighting continues through their soundcheck. They try talking to us

and while the other guys go for it, I resist knowing that they are only wanting to talk to us so that they don't have to fight with each other. And maybe also because it is nice to, ah, "Speak American" after having gone native for so long. I'm mute though and after eating an entire chicken and a bunch of other meat I find a table way in the back of the auditorium and nod off to sleep. I open my eyes at one point to see some guy I've never seen before waving at me like a mad man. He makes his way over and starts pumping my hand like handpumping was a sporting event.

"You don't know me but I'm a big fan. I love your music." He's urging the words out by contorting his body as he speaks.

I lean up on one elbow on the hard wood table where I had been sleeping and say "Thanks."

"I am in Baton and we love you." His eyes are glistening.

I say kind of wanely in the face of this kind of adoration, "well I'm glad we're playing together then." He leaves and goes walking back to his band mates who cluster around him, I'm guessing wondering what we spoke about.

We get our keys and go to the hotel where I'm, as a result of the dice that decide everything, rooming with Niko, one of the slowest moving people I know. This is good. It means I can shit, shower, and shave before he's even begun moving. It also means I will have to wait for him to finish the same but I haven't figured this out yet. But we get back to the club and Baton is playing and it is packed. And they are great. The singer is the one who spoke to me earlier and he manages to evoke some sort of Oxbowian spirit on stage. He's dressed much like I am and I start to think I'm seeing my doppelganger. After they play I tell them they are great and I ask him to sing a song with us.

He agrees and the bass player's very pretty girlfriend looks at me strangely and I get a rising in my shorts and I know this is going to be a good show...and it is.

We play to about 380 people...shitty number for Van Halen, great for us, and the guy from Baton comes up on stage and we do a song together and it feels like Dino Martin and Jerry Lewis (a fucking French national treasure) and we get three encores and at the end some guy walks up to me and says in a perfect southern accent, "I'm from Richmond, Virginia, I sing for a band called Kepone, and Frank Sinatra died today," before walking away into the cooling night.

Tour Dates:

06.05.1998 wed off/arrival
07.05.1998 thu off
08.05.1998 fri italy: faenza clandestino
09.05.1998 sat italy: orbetello nondimeno

10.05.1998 sun italy: Imperia babilonia
11.05.1998 mon france: lyon pez ner
12.05.1998 tuefrance: lille rockline
13.05.1998 wed france: nantes panonica
14.05.1998 france: lyon pez ner
11.05.1998 mon france: poitiers confort moderne
15.05.1998 fri france: st. etienne festival
16.05.1998 sat france: paris instant chavires
11.05.1998 mon france: poitiers confort moderne
17.05.1998 sun france: off
18.05.1998 mon b: off
19.05.1998 tueb: diksmuide 4ad
20.05.1998 wed b: kwaadmechelen stipke
21.05.1998 thu germany: hannover glocksee
22.05.1998 fri germany: wilhelmshaven kling klang
23.05.1998 sat germany: berlin insel
24.05.1998 sun bielefeld kamp