

OXBOW / Tour Diary / Europe: 1995 (Niko)

You are absolutely hateful. The devil is the flesh of your brain, your eyes, your hands.
You are reading this. - First page of tour diary

There are very few things in the world that really piss me off. The last was when I came home and found a guy I'd never met banging away on my old Martin, a guitar that I've loved and played for 15 years. I was so instantly incensed, filled with tear- making blistering rage I realized later it must be like coming home to find a strange man sodomizing your girlfriend in her sleep. Being on tour is often a vigilant avoidance of situations like this.

Traveling with a band is for me a bringing of what is most precious into public places. For instance: those little communication devices called instruments are of necessity left lying about in dark smelly clubs in dodgy parts of large cities. Too, touring can be like the vulgar practicing of religion in public: I believe like Stravinsky that praying is something you should do at home, if you must - in private. Just so, playing our music has to be very personal, or it shrivels up like a dead insect. For people watching us, that don't go with us and the sound, I suppose it must be a little embarrassing. At best on a good night however, the good people that stand facing us in the dark are become holy too.

Tubingen

The first show in Tubingen, Germany is remarkable for being such an incredible, needed release after the months of preparations for the tour. Blood, bright red, all over my white Stratocaster guitar from a cut on the little finger of my right hand - from hitting the strings too hard. Earlier in our set, I almost start crying, thankfully don't. At the end Tom knocked my newish Les Paul off a speaker cabinet by mistake, bending the guitar jack and ruining the patch cord. But what a release! I've been waiting for a real tour for Oxbow - especially a European tour - since we became a band around 1990. Finally on stage and playing our music to a room full of people, far from San Francisco.

This first show is a little loose. But, there really is no way to be fully prepared for the uncertainties of performance. So all we can do on stage and especially at this first show, is follow our feelings. To close eyes and go to that strange beautiful place...

The Near Room

The Near Room is where the great American boxer/poet Muhammed Ali said he went when he got knocked on the head too hard. I see it as a kind of subconscious, dream playground. Ali described it as inhabited by all kinds of weird shit: crocodiles playing trombones, bats on trumpets, bright flashing colored lights, screaming snakes. Chaos. Or, just like playing on stage with Oxbow.

As I said, this first show is memorable too for almost making me cry. I'm not exactly much of a weeper, but last fall when I was in Europe I broke up badly with what had been my long time girlfriend. Really a horrible time. Anyway, being back in the same atmosphere, specifically in Germany brought all those old feelings back in force. Then, I had been over playing guitar with the English band God. This time from the moment I got off the plane in Frankfurt, all through the show in Tuebingen I kept reliving the past in my mind, in the most horrifying realistic ways. Truly a source of stress.

Coupled with the fact that the basic source for all Oxbow music and lyrics is love gone bad, the release of the show nearly released my tears too - nearly drove me to the kind of crying jag that just can't be stopped.

Thankfully it didn't start, I kept it together, kept playing, and the shaky moments passed. A stage is not the place you want to find yourself with that kind of hopeless self pity. The show was videotaped by the cool Thomas Venker.

The Bloodcaster

After two days off, the next show is in Nijmegen, Holland. Blood all over my white Stratocaster again from the same little finger as Tuebingen, again from playing too hard. The next show in Rennes while playing the Strat I hit my face on Eugene's flailing head and squash my nose, my vision gets hazy but not black - I didn't fully pass out. Blood all over the white Stratocaster and my white shirt and face from the deluge out the right side of my nose. I have a scar on the bridge of my nose for the rest of the tour. The last two shows I catch my wrist on the strings of the Strat and open a wound. Blood all over the Stratocaster, both shows. Generally, every performance there's some blood from cuts on my right hand or fingers, from hitting the Stratocaster strings too hard. Dan cleverly dubs it The Bloodcaster. The fingernails on each of the five fingers of my right hand are cracked sideways all the way across, in at least two places each, as far as half way to the cuticle on the index and middle fingers. This from playing hard. Finally, during sound check in Hamburg at the end of our first concentrated group of eight shows, I fall down backwards and land on my right arm. It scares the shit out of me: I can't straighten my arm or bring it to me without lots of pain. Playing that night, and for the rest of tour is not excruciating, but not far from it. Thank god for a day off the next day. Now at home two weeks after the last show and three weeks after Hamburg, it still wakes me up with the ache.



© M. Liebeskind

The tour was tough physically, but pretty easy mentally, with just a few exceptions. Exactly the opposite of what I expected. I credit this to our tour company Splatter, and especially Manuel Liebeskind from Splatter (now in Berlin) who traveled with us, did sound and was de facto tour manager. A hell of a kind, talented guy and easy to get along with too.

Flee the Penis

Last night in Nijmegen, Holland a woman named Caroline approached me after we played. She had done the monitor mix on the undersize and near useless system and the seriousness of her tone made me expect the usual complaint about Eugene's giving the mic setup more of a bashing than it could handle. Instead she began to tell me in quick, clear English that she was very upset he had showed her his penis.

The typical Dutch hard corners in her speech got sharper, her back straightened, her shoulders squared and she moved in to me until her nose would have touched mine like two cats before a fight. She said that he had brandished his flaccid penis at her only, that this made her sick, sick and that she would have left but that she was working and she couldn't leave even though she was an unpaid volunteer and that it was very unusual to find a woman doing what she was doing and maybe this was why, and that she didn't want to hear that it was "just rock and roll." She was a tall and a little imposing, black clothes, long curly black hair, and big brown-black eyes in a wide palewhite, honest face.

After a while she realized that I would listen to her but that I would not agree with her. Finally I sensed one of her major concerns, and said that she could tell her fellow employees at their meeting the next day, that someone in the band had said he was glad that she had talked to us, and not kept it inside. She then changed her demeanor completely, a smile came over her face, she reached out and tried to kiss me on the lips. I wasn't sure about this, dodged it, and then we did a little dance and finally the outcome was the Swiss three little kisses on the cheeks. A kind of resolution...

Before this, Dan had heard her say she wanted to "flee" Eugene's penis (for his sake, I hope a first). The tour was now dubbed the Flee the Penis Tour. This turned out to be prescient...

The problems with our tour poster, of a naked muscular striding-Neanderthal man, cause comment wherever we go. People take the posters down because they don't like them. They take them down to bring home for their own walls. They deface them by tearing them in half. They carefully cut the penis out, leaving the rest. We see the disembodied penis on other walls, outside and in clubs. Often the promoters hang the posters with the penis covered by a flyer or another poster. Everyone has something to say about the cartoon of a naked man. I have many conversations, maybe two or three in every one of the seventeen clubs we play, about the poster, the man, the penis. The "Flee

the Penis Tour" indeed. I wonder if a drawing of a walking naked woman would have caused as much fuss. Maybe it should. Maybe neither should be a cause of much excitement. I tend towards the latter.

In Nijmegen we see Fred Maessen, one of the coolest humans on planet earth. Fred runs Brinkman records in Holland - our (savior and) main record company. Along with his girlfriend Dorethy, they are an oasis of friendliness and laissez faire fun. The next night we completely screw up and drive around Paris without seeing any of it, and spend the night in the suburbs with Eugene's college buddy Scott, his wife Ignes (both nice), and their wonderfully named one year old son, Bruno Max. Scott continues on with us to Rennes.

Feed Me, Love Me

The next day in Rennes, France we play with a pretty cool, metallic, French band called Cut the Navel Cord. They have an amazingly involved light show and draw a crowd that packs the small place, most of which stay to see us. The show is memorable for the blood squirting episode outlined above; the fact that the crowd cheers with recognition when we start playing Gal (a highlight of the tour for me: I try to stare down at my guitar, pretend it happens all the time and not beam a thankful puppy-dog grin at the audience); and the fact that there is a particularly beautiful girl that stands behind my amplifier for the whole set so that every time I turn around to tune, she looks straight into my eyes.

Now, I have to say that I have seen and met friendly, very cool girls all over the world (well, at least everywhere I've been), but there really is something different about French girls. Ok, stop your booing and listen for a moment. I think it's a trust of us men, perhaps an understanding. As if their mothers had whispered to them every night before sleep: " ... Men are good, trust them, they are nearly the same as you; love is good, sex is a good thing, don't be afraid, do what feels good." Hence they seem on the whole, more relaxed and at ease about boy-girl stuff. Not that I have anything against women from any other part of the world (US included), or that I haven't seen this sort of behavior all over. It's just that it seems more prevalent in France, or in French women. Needless to say she left without speaking to me; but it was nice while it lasted.

Tom falls in love with a friend of a friend of mine, who brings us our dinner. Not an unexpected pick in the strangely lonely and affection-starved, tour state of mind. Who else to fall for but a woman who brings you a heaping plate of pasta?

Well, I have gone on and on and have said a great deal about very little of the tour. I think I've taken enough space spouting my thoughts though. If anyone wants more, or the rest, they can email me - or send regular mail to our post office box in the States:

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and I or we will write you back, per your preference.

I have to mention the great kindness and hospitality of Toeni at our German Label Crippled Dick Hot Wax, Thanks to he and his wife for much that was helpful. And indeed to everyone who promoted shows and fed and housed us, entertained us for a few hours, and put up with Eugene's demanding gastronomic requirements.

Briefly, tour hilights also include: finally hanging out in a Viennese coffee house; the playing at the shows - other than those mentioned above - in Basel, Berlin, Vienna, and N,rnberg, not necessarily in that order (none of which were recorded!); seeing Sandro the great (and former?) promoter of the Reithalle, Bern, again; sort-of meeting the interesting, distant, peaceful, spiritual woman at who's house we stayed in St. Galen, CH; the bountiful yet refined preshow dinner party near Luzern CH; one of the promoters at the beautiful de Insel club in Berlin who kept saying in German to his colleague over the phone how much he liked the show, and cursing loudly and repeatedly in English to prove it; the incredible American (means: huge) breakfast that Greg, the expatriate former Bass player for Plainfield made for us in Basel; and the drunken funlovers at our gig in Villingen-Schwenningen who came to see the fine band Kurt and us, and who made the whole damn show a party. Thanks to all those brave enough to come up and talk to us before/after and during shows. We are - some of us - a little shy too, and appreciate talking to others who like music and things akin.

See you soon.

Oxbow tour diary.

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Niko Wenner