



VINTAGE

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GIVE THE ANARCHIST  
A CIGARETTE

MICK FARREN

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## About the Book

Through a long and chequered career, Mick Farren has functioned as a writer, poet, rock star, rabble-rouser, critic and commentator, and even won a protracted obscenity trial at the Old Bailey. He has finally written his own highly personal and insightful account of the British counterculture in the 1960s and '70s, from the perspective of one who was right there in the thick of it.

With a continuing and unashamed commitment to the tradition of sex, drugs and rock '&' roll, he recounts a rollercoaster odyssey - sometimes violent and often hilarious - from early beatnik adventures in Ladbroke Grove, through the flowering hippies to the snarl of punk. Along the way, while he worked as the man on the door at the UFO club, was the driving spirit at IT and, of course, lead singer with the Social Deviants, he encountered the celebrated and the notorious, from Jimi Hendrix and Germaine Greer to Julie Burchill and Sid Vicious. He gives a firsthand, insider's account of the chaos, disorder and raging excess of those two highly excessive decades

## About the Author

Now in his early fifties, Mick Farren currently lives in Los Angeles. With some twenty books to his credit, plus a number of film and TV scripts and a wealth of journalism, his written output remains prodigious. He also still records and performs, and a recent tour of Japan with his band, the Deviants, culminated in the live CD *Barbarian Princes*. His most recent novel, *Jim Morrison's Adventures in the Afterlife*, was published in the US in 2000.

This book is dedicated to Susan Slater for seeing me  
through the more painful exhumations of recall, with  
affection,  
sympathy and Valium.



# Give the Anarchist a Cigarette

Mick Farren



PIMLICO

'Give a man a mask and he'll tell you the truth.' - Oscar Wilde

'A paranoid is someone who knows a little of what's going on.' - William S. Burroughs

Newspeak (1984) 'was designed not to extend but to distinguish the range of thought and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words to a minimum . . . the expression of unorthodox opinions, except on a very low level, was well-nigh impossible.' - George Orwell

## Author's Warning

I freely admit that I have left out many things that I would rather forget. I have also changed the names, or merely used the first names, of some private individuals who have committed no other offence than that they once passed through my perception. Although I have, as far as possible, checked dates and the chronological sequence of events, memory is fallible. It has also been repeatedly proved that, with the best will in the world, no two observers' impressions of the same events are going to be the same. Thus, while striving for maximum accuracy, the story you are about to hear remains highly subjective, and I suffer from a strong impulse to compact events for dramatic effect. You may also detect certain contradictions in my ideas and attitudes as time passes in this narrative. If that creates a problem, I can only refer you to Ralph Waldo Emerson: 'A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.'

*Back when the world was young  
Drunk on cheap well whisky  
And confused on mescaline  
Walking rattlesnake curves  
On sidewalks that refused to lay down  
Resisting  
Resisting  
Resisting all the importunate invasions of reality*

*Back when the world was young  
Searching for the gateway  
To the secret garden  
The maps to the labyrinth  
And the silver key  
With a woman in red shoes  
Whose name was maybe Dolores  
Dolores?  
Or perhaps her name was . . . Laverne?*

*Back when the world was young  
And fear was so perfectly academic  
And the scales were so perfectly poised  
That I could still pace the razor's edge  
Without cutting my feet or losing any further toes  
And I believed  
And I believed  
And I believed in every fucking drop of rain that fell*

*Back when the world was young  
And you had but to softly ask  
The crushed whisper of velvet  
The sheer innocence of pure desire  
And the requested favour was granted and gratified  
So will somebody give?  
So will somebody give?  
So will somebody please  
Give the anarchist a cigarette?*

1996, recorded to music by Jack Lancaster and Wayne Kramer

# Prologue

## Application to Become an Alien

'LIST ALL THE organisations you have ever joined or of which you have ever been a member. List all publications to which you have ever contributed as a writer . . .'

He looked, I swear to God, like John Dean of Watergate fame, the boyish attorney to Richard Nixon. He was probably younger than I was and I was thirty-five. His grey suit was immaculate, his fingernails were manicured and he was shaved so closely that his cheeks were close to a baby pink. He smelled of aftershave and breath mints. By the standards of 1979, his hair was unusually short, a colourless near-blond and neatly parted. In maybe five years he would be bald. He was some kind of Under Assistant Attaché with Responsibility for Immigration, and his eyes were cold. He clearly felt part of that responsibility was to keep individuals like me from becoming Resident Aliens in the United States. On the wall was a photograph of Jimmy Carter in a light wood frame. In a year or so, it would be replaced by one of Ronald Reagan, although neither of us knew it at the time. That election had yet to come, although Britain had already made its turn to the right. Margaret Thatcher had replaced Jim Callaghan, and I was getting out of town. Unless the John Dean across the desk with the small American flag attached to the pen and pencil set found a way to stop me, I was going to live in New York City, where I would find bars with Hank Williams and Louis Jordan on the jukebox, multiple TV channels that ran all night, and a man could lawfully drink until four o'clock in the morning.

I looked at the questionnaire John Dean had pushed across the desk at me. Long and hugely detailed, it indicated I was in trouble. Most applicants for Resident Alien status and issue of the notorious Green Card do not find themselves subjected to such intense scrutiny. I was marrying a US citizen, and it should have been only marginally harder than obtaining a visa.

'Drugs?'

'No.'

'Communist?'

'No.'

'Anarchist?'

'No.'

'Syphilis?'

'No.'

'TB? Congenital insanity? Criminal record? Burden on society?'

'No, no, no and no.'

The questions asked by US immigration exactly reflect American paranoias regarding foreigners from the Ellis Island days of the 1890s to the present. The problem is that none of the US immigration restrictions are ever dumped. The old ones remain while others are simply layered on top, producing a weird bureaucratic archaeology. Once one has ploughed through this catalogue of a nation's irrational fears, the papers are sent away and are run through the big CIA fruit machine in Frankfurt, and, for the majority of applicants, that's all she wrote. Unfortunately, in my case, the big CIA fruit machine took one look and came up three lemons, and I was asked to report to John Dean. The interview took place at the embassy in Grosvenor Square, in a room very like the one in which John Vernon threatens Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry*, and I realised I was in trouble.

To be denied resident status at this point would be somewhere between an embarrassment and a disaster. I had just got married. My good friend Felix Dennis, then into

making his first handful of millions, had thrown a lavish wedding reception, complete with inexhaustible champagne and a white Rolls-Royce. My drunken mates were all present, plus a goodly selection of what was laughingly called 'the underground', and figures from the stoned fringe of my immediate rock & roll past. Felix had rented a mansion on Embassy Row, at the western end of Kensington Gardens, for the bash. Next door was the Russian Embassy and, at the bottom of the heavily guarded, maximum-security street, stood Kensington Palace, future home of Charles and Di. At one point in the proceedings a helicopter landed in the grounds of the palace, possibly bringing Charles home for his tea. After an affair like that - not only a wedding, but a tacit farewell party - how was I going to turn round and tell Felix, 'Sorry, but I'm not going after all'? I had said my goodbyes, disposed of my stuff, given up the flat and burned my metaphorical bridges. Now this large boulder had appeared in the final stretch of the road and I had cause for cold sweat.

'All the publications to which . . .'

' . . . you have ever contributed as a writer.'

The cold eyes looked at me as though I were some kind of specimen. They reminded me of the young Roy Cohn, in old black-and-white clips of the McCarthy hearings, lurking and sinister, behind the raving senator from Wisconsin. In the Eighties I would see a lot more of them. That detached shark-gaze would be common in Manhattan, among the yuppies of Wall Street, the ones determined to be multi-millionaires by thirty. I guess my John Dean was the Washington, State Department version, but I had no time to wonder what he ultimately wanted. I was racking my brains as to what incident, action, prank or polemic the CIA, or whomever, had fixed on as a possible reason to deem me too dangerously subversive to set up housekeeping in New York City. God only knew there were enough from which to choose. In the almost sixteen years since my first night in

the House of the Chinese Landlord, I had lent momentum to a good deal of mayhem.

On the possible list was disruption of a national TV talk show. I'd taken a lot of the blame, a little unreasonably I thought, for the trashing of one of the world's most ambitious rock festivals. I had also organised a very bizarre rock festival of my own. I had edited the country's largest-circulation underground newspaper for a number of years. I had been dragged into the Old Bailey to defend against major obscenity charges a comic book I'd published. But that couldn't count, could it? Hadn't I been acquitted without a stain on my character? I had founded the British White Panther Party, for reasons greatly different from those most of my critics believed. Earlier, I had been the leader of a notoriously unpleasant rock 'n' roll band, and made a number of albums. I had attended more marches, demonstrations, riots, sit-ins, pranks and pieces of street theatre than I cared to recall, and had associated with dozens of clearly undesirable - and possibly criminal - characters.

As if all that wasn't enough for them to nail me, I had also committed my ideas and dissatisfaction with authoritarian consumer capitalism to print in hundreds of thousands of words that included rants, essays, monographs and, at that point, five novels and one work of non-fiction, all dedicated to the overthrow of Western civilisation. I realised John Dean might have enough to keep me out of the USA for the rest of my days, if he so desired. As the interview continued, I found myself recounting a version of the previous sixteen years of my life and times, in a censored and highly abridged version that was nothing like the book you are about to read.



# Chapter One

## The House of the Chinese Landlord

EACH LEG OF the iron bedstead stood in a small pan containing about quarter of an inch of liquid paraffin. The pans were about three inches across, perhaps the lids of Cadbury's cocoa tins. In the late winter of 1964 I had only a limited experience of West London flophouses, but I was certain these things were related to a major insect infestation. By the age of twenty I wasn't totally unaware of the lower orders of life. As a student, I'd had my share of hard-time wretchedness, particularly each term, when a government grant that was intended to last for three months was spent in three weeks on beer and Beatle boots. I'd seen cultures of alien bacteria growing in sinks of unwashed dishes that would have been the envy of germ-warfare scientists, and dirty laundry ignored so long that it threatened to glow in the dark, but that was student sleaze and came with the underlying reassurance that one day we would come to man's estate, and give up the pose of the unwashed. Except that here I was, walking into a rented room in the House of the Chinaman, not only still unwashed, but apparently hitting bottom. I was no longer a student, and this might be as close to man's estate as I was going to get. This was not a drill, but the real thing. I was unemployed and maybe unemployable. The bed in my new home seemingly had to be protected from marauding bugs, and the only reason I was able to rent even this place, low as it was on the food chain of accommodation, was that I had made a relatively modest amount of money selling clockwork jumping dogs on

Oxford Street and Regent Street in the weeks prior to Christmas. Now that Christmas had jingled its bells and gone, Oxford and Regent Streets were a hard place to sell anything. Perhaps even your body.

Aside from the smell of paraffin, a presence existed in the room. Not quite a stench, more of an emanation, old and malevolent, deep-seated and ingrained in the very walls. Had it been more aggressive, H.P. Lovecraft might have given it an unpronounceable name, but this entity was content merely to hang in its own unventilated air, because it knew it already had me low-down and terrified. Individually, no one of its parts was all that threatening. Jeyes Fluid, cooked cabbage and elderly grease, ten-year-old Woodbines, rising damp, mildew and bug powder were all fairly innocuous when taken singly. This cocktail of misery was, however, rendered more daunting when coupled with the legend of the Chinese landlord, who lived in hermit-like isolation in the ground-floor front, sharing his room, in an almost Norman Bates intimacy, with the body of his dead father, while he sought to raise the money to ship it back to China and some ancestral place of burial. It was more than enough to convince me that I had finally sunk to my true level in the world, a bottom feeder returning to the primal slime.

In retrospect, I seriously doubt there was a word of truth in the story about the landlord and his late lamented father. That dreary twilight house of strange smells and forty-watt lightbulbs had lots of rooms and every one of them was occupied. The landlord must have been raking in the cash, and how much could it cost to ship the body of a wizened and possibly mummified old man, even all the way to China? I now suspect the tall tale had its roots in both innate racism and the need of the building's other denizens for some threadbare romance. A year or so earlier Bob Dylan had played a bit-part in a BBC TV play, *Madhouse on Castle Street*, about a house not altogether dissimilar to the one I

was in. The video version, however, had been chock-full of quirky, eccentric characters, and Bob himself sat on the stairs singing and strumming his guitar. No such frolics in the House of the Chinaman. Even if the father's body was a figment, the place still had the atmosphere of a mausoleum.

The other tenants were solitary, male and Irish to a man. Labourers who had taken the Dublin ferry in search of a better hourly rate working on the post-war reconstruction of Greater London. The men in the Chinaman's house weren't the wild boys who drank and sang and fought in the local pubs on a Friday and Saturday night. These were lonely sub-social individuals, far from family and friends, focused on little but the wage packet, sending it home or saving for something better, or maybe just plain lost.

One corner of a strip of wallpaper, an equilateral triangle some eighteen inches on each side, was held up by a drawing pin. Whatever paste had originally kept it in place had long since decomposed and turned to dust. The wallpaper might once have been an institutional shade of dull pink, but now, like everything else in my room that didn't actually have a thin coat of grease or grime, it had faded to an approximation of the colour of dust. In mitigation the room was relatively large, with a high ceiling still showing the paint-eroded ruins of a plaster rose. It had probably been the rear area of the drawing room, when originally a middle-class, Victorian, one-family home. It was also almost devoid of furniture. A straight-backed chair, a small table, a wardrobe that I would destroy directly I consolidated my position as the one aberrant tenant. If nothing else, I had space to pace and bemoan my lot.

My new home may have been inversely gothic in its drab squalor, but drab and squalid were pretty much the way of West London in those distant days. Outside was the Colin MacInnes world of uneasy coexistence between the white working class and newly arrived West Indians; a lot less colourful than those who never saw it would have us

believe. The lights may have been on Piccadilly and the West End undergoing its Swinging London facelift, but, just a few tube stations out, the city was the monochrome of an Ealing comedy, brown on grey, highlighted in sepia, with maybe the odd yellow-painted front door, and of course convoys of red double-decker buses, but mainly dented dustbins and black, upright taxis. Even the garbage was dull, the oily black and white of newspaper-wrapped fish and chips. The garish styrofoam professionalism of American fast food had yet to arrive, and all that remained was the hardly exotic frontage of the odd Wimpy Bar or Golden Egg. About the only real indication that the times might actually be a'changing was the new look in Sunday-supplement advertising: billboards of David Bailey Beefeaters urging one to Drinka Pinta Milka Day, and photo-noir reminders by a guy who looked like Frank Sinatra that you were never alone with a Strand.

Sunday-supplement advertising, or, at least, Sunday-supplement graphic design, had been my masterplan maybe eighteen months earlier. At least it was the aim I dutifully recited when asked. Yes, I was going to rise to the affluent paradise of pink shirts, black knitted ties, suits from the younger, more dashing end of Savile Row, a black Volvo sports and a James Bond apartment. David Ogilvy, Hugh Hefner and Ian Fleming had all contributed to a deception, an illusion and eventually a lie that I'd maintained throughout my four years of art school. Except that, with each succeeding year, it had become harder and harder to remain convinced. A part of that fantasy had been chipped away in Dealey Plaza when they'd caught Jack Kennedy in triangulated sniper fire. (And please don't irritate me with any lone gunman crap. We know by now pretty much what went down, don't we? All that's lacking are a few of the lesser details and the necessary public admission.) JFK had been the apex of that specific daydream. The handsome young president, with the beautiful wife and the beautiful

children, *our* president, who had faced Nikita Khrushchev across the unthinkable abyss and then stepped back from the brink of nuclear holocaust at the eleventh hour, just when us kids were close to accepting we all had only a day or so to live before being flash-fried to a thermonuclear crisp. The old men had ordered him cut down in his prime and, ever after, faith in the yellow brick road to material success had been much less easy.

Despite this, for a long time I continued to pay lip service to a conventional ambition. Even when I grew my hair, cleaved to the bohemian and began to dress in a manner that one life-drawing instructor referred to as 'a sociopathic Fidel Castro', I still fostered the illusion that the corporate straight and narrow was my goal. It kept the grown-ups quiet. A phase, they told themselves, and I let them believe it. The truth was that I'd only ever had two true ambitions in life. One was to be the first man on the moon, but that died around the time that *Sputnik* went into bleeping orbit around the Earth, and I realised that I was born too late. Immediately after that I switched my desires to Elvis Presley. Many years later, in New York City, a psychiatrist would ask me, 'So you wanted to have sex with Elvis Presley?'

A disillusionment with psychiatry was already setting in, but this was idiocy. 'No (you damned fool), I wanted to *be* Elvis Presley.'

That ambition would be maintained until 1977, when the big, bloated Elvis croaked on the Graceland toilet, irrefutably proving that not even Elvis could be Elvis. Does a pattern start to emerge? A tangible need to make a mark, to be adored? To beat death and become immortal? Hardly a target orientation congruent with a career in advertising, where all is sublimated to the product. I didn't realise until years later, but *I* was the only product I wanted to promote.

In the House of the Chinese Landlord I moved to the window. The landlord had long ago decided curtains were too good for tenants, and my isolation was protected from

the eyes of overlooking buildings only by a sheet of greaseproof paper, turned with age to the colour and consistency of parchment. Clearly the landlord considered we had no need to see out. I scraped the paper experimentally with the nail of my right index finger. It flaked like the wrapping of a pharaoh's cadaver, so I picked a hole about the size of a postcard and peered out into a dank, semi-drizzle of a London winter evening. Lighted windows, vertical rectangles, the yellow of electric bulbs and the electric blue-grey of black-and-white TV sets; outside was not only Colin MacInnes' Ladbroke Grove, but also, in a wider sense, and to paraphrase Bono, outside was England. In 1963/4 we were about a year and some months into the fall of the thirteen-year Conservative government, courtesy of John Profumo, Stephen Ward, Mandy Rice-Davies and Christine Keeler. The venerable and aloof Harold Macmillan, of the Fifties economic, you've-never-had-it-so-good boom, had resigned, and the stage was set for the ascension to Prime Minister of Harold Wilson in his Gannex raincoat.

The Profumo scandal had also blown the lid off a particular stratum of London prostitutes operating exactly in this neighbourhood. The *News of the World* enjoyed a lip-licking field day with night-shadow women like Ronna Ricardo, and black hustlers like Lucky Gordon. Notting Hill was portrayed as a sink of commercial perversion. With singular irony, the self-same Conservative government had commissioned the Wolfenden Report on national sexual morality. While recommending the legalisation of homosexual acts between consenting adults, the report had also created the Street Offences Act, which effectively drove the whores from the pavements of Soho and Bayswater and into damp Victorian basements, gas-fire emporia of equally Victorian accessorised sex, where naked accountants and insurance salesmen knelt before corsets and boots, canes and riding crops. Instead of soliciting passing males, the hookers of London remained out of sight, if not out of mind, advertising

their services on discreetly euphemistic postcards in the windows of local newsagents. 'French Lessons', 'Large Chest for Sale', 'Stocks and Bonds', 'Remedial Discipline by Stern Governess' - the oblique side of obvious, with a local phone number.

Only a complete inability to come up with a substitute for the old morality allowed an exhausted hypocrisy to maintain its grip. How could a young man like myself aspire to any status quo when the status quo was fragmenting into disfunctionality? Paradox abounded. An elderly gent wrote to *Penthouse* bemoaning that, in the wake of Courrèges, Mary Quant and *The Avengers*, young women now boldly walked abroad in a style of costume that he had formerly paid professionals to model for him while he guiltily masturbated. His illicit thrill was no longer thrilling in the free light of day, and his former sex life was shot to shit in the face of now and happening fashion.

The fall of governments and the crash of ethics were producing a myriad of reverberations. Somewhere beyond the window the Beatles existed, as did the Rolling Stones. A band called the High Numbers were thinking of changing their name to the Who. Two albums worth of Bob Dylan had made their way across the Atlantic, and John Coltrane had revolutionised bebop by recording *Giant Steps*. Joe Orton and Tom Stoppard were changing the course of the London theatre, Rudolph Nureyev was making ballet hip, and even the iconography of advertising, my route of least resistance and career choice of last resort, had adopted a wholly different form. The new pop art of Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol used the Campbell's soup can, and Marilyn Monroe, in a context that - to me and my art-school mates - was, at the very least, non-specifically subversive. This was the carnival with which I wanted to run away, but so far I had failed even to find the fairground.

If I claimed that only external events, trends and even fundamental changes caused my disillusionment with the

fine rewards of Sixties capitalism, I'd be lying through my teeth. A nightmare childhood and an eleven-plus, grammar-school education, in a day-release penal colony, with a headmaster who knew instinctively that Eddie Cochran's big Gretsch guitar was the instrument of Lucifer, had left me with a lorry-load of baggage that made the straight-and-narrow tricky to navigate. I have resolved, in this book, not to delve into my childhood except where absolutely necessary. In recent years I've seen too many inadequates on *Oprah* looking for excuses and absolution in a lack of nurture, and attempting to blame their psychosis, stupidity or criminal self-obsession on parental deprivation or abuse. I can't comfortably cop a plea. That I had free-fallen out of higher learning, and finished up in this first-floor slum bedsit, was no one's fault but my own. This is not to ignore the fact, however, that I spent a good deal of my life being exceedingly angry.

Suffice to say that I was angry from the get go. Too angry for a life selling Sure deodorant and Smith's crisps. Maybe too angry even to be saved by full sensory deprivation and back-up drugs. Maybe too angry to do anything but strap dynamite all over my body and detonate out of this mortal coil in a crowded theatre or tube-train carriage, taking with me as many of the sons-of-bitches as I could. Alternatively, I could climb to the top of a tall building with a high-powered rifle and start randomly sniping. This anger also came with its own insoluble chicken-and-egg equation. I had been angry for as long as, if not longer than, I could remember. I had no recollection of a time when I wasn't angry. No single event could in any way qualify as the Great Primal Piss-Off. From the age of three to the age of fifteen I had engaged in violent conflict with my wicked stepfather, but I seemed to recall I'd been angry even before that combat commenced. Okay, so delving deeper, the Nazis had blown my father out of the sky over Cologne and had even, according to legend, attempted to drop bombs on Baby Me. I was convinced,



however, that neither of these represented the true roots of my rage. I was certain the fury came first, and then went looking for acceptable targets, rather than the more normal process of objects, individuals, ideas and situations arousing my fury. I was constantly looking for trouble and hoping I'd come to the right place.

Perhaps that was why I had wound up in the House of the Chinese Landlord, a setting in which self-destructive rage might fester. Even back then, I was aware that self-destruction could go hand-in-hand with unwarranted self-aggrandisement, the last resort of the previously unnoticed. Here I am! Look at *me*, the *most* wretched of the Earth! Notice me or I'll do something grandiosely violent. Even striving to be last among the worst was just another way of begging for attention. The only factor stopping me becoming a human bomb, a serial killer or curling into a Kafkaesque foetal ball and hoping that I'd wake up a cockroach was that I didn't seem to be alone.

In the new culture that had been gaining momentum since the mid-Fifties, symptoms abounded of a common and similar rage. The blood, gore and hilariously twisted plot lines of EC horror comics came from roots I instantly recognised. Why else had Dr Frederick Wertham and the US Congress driven them out of business? Likewise, in the cinema, James Dean and Marlon Brando glowered with a similar, self-righteously fuck-you attitude. 'What are you rebelling against, Johnny?' 'Whaddaya got?' Jack Kerouac wrote with a familiar frenetic compulsion and, at the other end of the rainbow, *Mad* magazine's 'humour in a jugular vein' tilted at exactly the same windmills at which I longed to lunge a lance.

The mother-lode of rage, though, seemed to have firmly lodged itself in rock & roll. The pre-army Elvis wasn't only handsome, overtly sexual and blessed with the Voice of God, he was also sneeringly mad as hell and unwilling to take it. Through the duration of 'Be Bop A Lula' and a dozen

other deceptively innocuous tunes, Gene Vincent positively vibrated with malcontent frustration. Even the Beatles, no matter how mop-top lovable the *Daily Mirror* might pretend they were, included the baleful myopic stare of the angry young Lennon.

The only problem was that all of those on my list of supposed kindred spirits not only had skills and access to a medium through which they could channel their anger, but were finding fame and fortune into the bargain. My own attempts at an angry creativity had been notably low-yield. I had yet to try writing like Kerouac, but I had furiously slashed and splashed paint on canvas, but then sensed that to achieve any success in painting one eventually had to play the gallery game, and that seemed scarcely possible in my current mindset. Without the social/commercial skills of a Peter Blake or a David Hockney, who was currently swanning around in a gold lamé jacket proclaiming his genius, the path of painting could lead only to Vincent Van Gogh and penniless death, certifiably insane with only one ear. I had sung with my first garage bands, succeeding in frightening not only any potential audience, but also some of my band mates. The general consensus seemed to be that I 'couldn't fucking sing', but I wouldn't let that deter me. The signs were marginally in my favour. If Bob Dylan could grab the world's attention with his bizarre and grating imitation of Woody Guthrie, surely I could continue to hope?

Thus far, my only really successful channelling of anger had been in a relentless guerrilla warfare against any authority figure that presented itself. Teachers, police constables, bus inspectors, park attendants - all received the bad vibes of this baby Bolshevik and, in this, I came back full circle to the problem of self-destruction. Short of becoming a professional criminal, which I didn't see happening - lacking as I did any flair for the covert and the necessary material motivation - I knew that the automatic challenging of authority was essentially a no-win situation.

As Bobby Fuller would point out a couple of years later, when you fought the law, the law inevitably won.

I moved to the bed and gingerly sat down, relieved to find that no phalanx of insects immediately rushed me. I took a Rothmans from a packet of ten and lit one. I'd smoked king-size Rothmans since I was thirteen. As the smoke drifted up into the silent air of the Chinese Landlord's room, I realised that I was making my first mark and maybe my first modification. Like a cat marking its territory, the smell of my fresh cigarette smoke was invading the room. As I dragged on the fag, I realised it was hardly the time to dwell on the wretched pass to which life had brought me. If I didn't find a distraction, the odds were on the room forcing me into a state of severe depression, and that was a victory I couldn't concede so early in the game. I stood up. With no television, no radio and my blue-and-white Philips record player still needing to be picked up from someone else's flat, plus a total disinclination to unpack my stuff or otherwise make myself any more at home, the logical course appeared to be to go down the pub. Maybe the House of the Chinese Landlord would look different with three or four pints inside me.

## The Sphere of Alex Stowell

After approximately a week and a half in the House of the Chinese Landlord, I came to the conclusion that a human being could ultimately adjust to just about anything. An optimistic social worker might have said I was accepting the situation for what it was, as a prelude to turning my life around. Needless to say, I didn't see it like that. As far as I was concerned, I was questing into an indefinable unknown, without a road map and maybe without a paddle. It was also possible that the room was starting to adapt to me. The sinister presence had fallen back as I consolidated my beachhead, progressively invading its evil ambience with

my own occupational smells, possessions and influence. In the matter of the bugs, I had thrown caution to the winds and courageously removed the tins of paraffin from under the legs of the bed. The presence of these makeshift devices was simply too depressing to live with. Strangely, nothing happened. No Mongol horde of six-legged bloodsuckers descended like wolves on the fold and, indeed, from that moment on the room never played host to any more insects than might tolerably be expected. In an attempt to make home a little more homely, I had obtained for myself a length of dark-blue fabric and fashioned it into a curtain after scraping away all of the dried and deceased greaseproof paper on the window. Magazines, newspapers and books had started to gather. The cover of William Burroughs' *The Naked Lunch* single-handedly helped to put a new perspective on my abode. Although I was hardly living the life of Burroughs' fictional alter ego William Lee, I could perceive certain points of commonality. Through half-closed eyes and stretching my imagination, I could convince myself that the room might exist somewhere in the labyrinths of Interzone, which gave me some solid fantasy cover into which I could retreat when the need arose. All my life, I had sought refuge in the sanctum of fantasy when stress or boredom grew too oppressive. At a very early age I had perfected the trick of becoming Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future, or Paladin from the TV show *Have Gun, Will Travel* whenever reality became insupportable, and I made such daydream sanctuary the frequent saviour of my mental health.

After some procrastination I had finally collected my blue-and-white Rexine record player. The delay had mainly been the result of its being in the custody of a woman I now wanted to avoid. Reclamation achieved, though, the room took on a whole new perspective. Buddy Holly and Gene Vincent, Elvis and Miles Davis, the crucial Bob Dylan, Nancy Wilson and Cannonball Adderley came in as the second

wave of invasion, and after that the ominous presence didn't have a prayer and was confined to the lathe and plaster of the walls.

The rules in the House of the Chinese Landlord were no music and no women, but I played my records anyway. When I dropped the stylus onto the first disc, I half-expected threats of eviction, but, surprisingly, nothing happened. Now I'd broken the first of the rules, the obvious next mission was to start working on the second, although even with my modest improvements, the room was in no way the eligible bachelor pad as promoted in *Playboy* and *Man about Town*. I could hardly imagine many women relishing the ambience, except maybe those with very bad self-images. Try as I might, the place could still be mistaken for the lair of a serial murderer, more Ed Gein than Ted Bundy. A new variation on Groucho Marx's paradox: where Groucho wouldn't want to join any club that would have him as a member, I wouldn't want to be with any woman who'd be willing to come back to this place. Callow as I was, I had yet to realise that it is a much better idea for the single male to let the woman invite him to her domestic quarters, with possible creature comforts like food, warmth, planned decor and even a television set. I'd yet to find the confidence that women might actually do the inviting.

Rather than repeat the tired cliché that rules are made to be broken, I should explain my theory of exemption, as I applied it to the playing of records in the House of the Chinese Landlord. I figured that if I simply went ahead and put on 'Rave On' by Buddy Holly with enough confidence and panache, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, the landlord would also accept it was the most natural thing in the world and would say nothing about it. I didn't so much break rules as simply decide they didn't apply to me. Sound tenuous? Maybe, but over the years it has worked far more times than the law of averages would logically dictate. As in all things, success was not

guaranteed, and I have found myself in serious trouble because some son-of-a-bitch didn't recognise my exemption, or perhaps said son-of-a-bitch actually recognised it all too well. I nevertheless continue to be amazed at how many people will accept my bullshit.

As far as I can figure it, self-exemption from the rules is a product of three factors: accent, attitude and a total willingness to appear less than sane. The accent part I learned at a very tender age. Up to the age of five, my mother had raised me to have a near-perfect Oxbridge accent and generally to behave like a little gentleman. It seemed to amuse the majority of her Martini-drinking women friends, and I was complimented and adored for it. Then, at five, on the playground of the local mixed infants school in which I'd been unenthusiastically enrolled, I discovered to my horror that good manners and enunciation didn't cut it. I had to talk common and act like a surly lout within a fast twenty-four hours; if I didn't assume the protective covering, I was going to have class war - in the form of a six-year-old accredited school bully, Tony Attfield - break out all over my sorry, Bertie Wooster, talking-through-my-nose, la-de-dah arse. Fortunately, I had enough native intelligence not to completely eighty-six the Oxbridge, but to keep it in my back pocket to be pulled out at times of threat or dire emergency.

In my subsequent war with authority, which fundamentally commenced at West Tarring Mixed Infants, threat and dire emergency tended to dog my footsteps, but I quickly discovered (in dealings with low-echelon authority figures like policemen, stage-door security and gamekeepers in rural estates when one is committing criminal trespass) that whipping out the accent and giving them a shot of their master's voice could work miracles. Of course, this technique only really works in England, or its comparatively recent former colonies, where a nuance of accent can pin your socio-economic status for the last three