

Monsignor's Tome Nashville

*I Got Dem
Honky Tonkin'
Nashville Cat Freezin'
Pigskin Bustin'
Blues Ag'in*

*Nashville Cats
Play clean as country water
Nashville Cats
Play wild as mountain dew
Nashville Cats
Been playin' since they's babies
Nashville Cats
Get work before they're two.*

-John Sebastian

Tootsie's Orchid Lounge defines honky tonk. It is a long, narrow bar with two levels, just down from Legend's Corner on Broadway in Nashville, Tennessee, Music City, USA. It is a pretty scuzzy bar, the sort of a place where they swab down the floors and sidewalk with bleach every morning.

And tonight, in the waning days of 2003, it is very crowded. Taking on a role nobody else would, Bro Dave, aka Smilin' Engineer (yes, he of Indy Bowl fame), and I are squeezing into Tootsie's in order to do some important first night reconnaissance here in Music City. It is a fitting way to end a long day of driving from the land of cheese, a much longer trip than we anticipated. The Irish Mist (Yes!) and I took the Champaign -Indianapolis-Louisville route, which is at least 30 minutes longer than the Paducah route, and after a few cocktails at our hotel up the hill on Broadway, Smilin' Engineer and I volunteer to check out the district. I know, I know, it is an awesome responsibility, but somebody has to do it.

Two bands, the better one downstairs, playing loud music, mostly country and southern rock, greet us. You literally have to rub up against everybody to get through the crowd, which can be exciting or scary as aitch, but we eventually make our way up to the second floor.

"Hey--You're Badgermaniac, right?"

"Nope."

"No, I know--You're the Monsignor."

"You are correct, sir. And you would be.....?"

"Oh.....I'm just.... a...a....lurker....."

Whatever. He mumbled it like he was a serial killer. We continue to meet denizens of the Badgermaniac Board as the week stumbles onward.

Now we're seriously into serial killing of brain cells, downing the Miller Lites, and buying shots for the band, and even chatting with some Wisconsin and Auburn fans ("War Polka!" we yell to the confused looks of the southern men), the Skynyrd and "Rocky Top" and "Sweet Home Alabama" and now some Springsteen blasting from band. Nice waitri behind the bar in this place, but as we descend back to the first floor where it is even crazier and more packed, some Badger gal is after the red beret and even I can tell she's seriously inebriated.....

Whoosh...we escape to the street.

"Ya know, if you weren't basically interested in just talking sports, you could get laid in this town," comments the Smilin' Engineer.

I suppose he's right, since I'm accosted by another female behind the counter at BB King's who also wants the beret. Now this bar is much more mellow, a decent blues band playing, but we find out we're too late to get any food. Nothing to do but keep drinking on an empty stomach, I guess. Where else to go? Here's a funky place with few people, for obvious reasons, we soon discover, since it has a Grateful Dead wannabe group (emphasis on the wannabe) trying to do something up there. We quickly exit. The Wild Horse Saloon is pretty dead, other than those two big guys (unnamed UW football players) sidling in next to us.

"Don't you wanna check our ID's?" the Engineer and I ask. Gadzooks, they don't!

We finish the night at the Second Fiddle, with excellent classic country, congratulate ourselves on a mission well done, and discover it is much easier walking down the hill on Broadway sober than it is to walk back up after several hours of reconnaissance. Only when we're back at the hotel do we remember the "message" we left for Sectio (where's my n) X: a bottle of Leinies in a Badger coolie left at the front desk for him for his late arrival.

*Well, there's 1,352 guitar pickers in Nashville
And they can pick more notes than the
Number of ants on a Tennessee anthill.
There's 1,352 guitar cases in Nashville
And anyone that unpacks his guitar can
Play twice as better than I will.*

Nashville cats.....

Not to say it is a rough morning, but it is. The Mist (Yes!) informs me I tried to go out the 4th floor window in the middle of the night, apparently mistaking it for the bathroom. At least I didn't pee on the drapes. Smilin' Engineer looks equally rusty this a.m.

But it is a traveling troupe to rival the San Antone traveling salvation show. Smilin' Engineer with his spouse and two children; my loving sister, aka That Awful Woman (TAW) with her two boys, Blue Hair and "Normal," Section X with his daughter the young Xette. Joining us later today are El Tio and Senora El Tio, together with Chico, Laverne and crew.

Certain things on a morning like this come crashing through the spiderwebs around my head. Like, don't think a cigar at 9 a.m. will chase away a hangover, to say nothing of making one's spouse excited to kiss you in the morning. And, more significantly, be aware you are south of the Mason-Dixon line. This fact frightens me, as I take a glance at the banner headlines across the top of the 12/30/03 Nashville Tennessean: Murfreesboro man tells why he froze 114 cats. What the eff? Can that be right? Young Blue Hair, who fancies himself a comedian, is going crazy with the possibilities of this story. I mean, the first 5 may be explainable -- something like, oh, I dunno, saving the dead one for an autopsy, putting the terribly injured one out of its misery, just not liking the looks of that one, thinking the others need some friends, having room in your freezer -- but what about #78? Why did he freeze #52? What caused the crystallization of #101? I remain looking over my shoulder the rest of the trip, wondering if I'm about to see a confederate Mr. Freeze, hunting for Yankee victims.....

The Irish Mist (Yes!) and I eventually pull ourselves together and head out for our chosen tourist trap for the day, the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, located just off Broadway and a few blocks from our hotel. It takes us about 3 hours to make our way through the Museum, and it is well worthwhile. Where else can you hear current stars on tape talking about the importance of

Hank Williams and George Jones? Pee Wee King, the early accordionist, is in the Hall of Fame, and is the only member from Wisconsin; King is the writer of "The Tennessee Waltz." We see the gold Cadillac that belonged to Elvis, and discover that the first C&W album to go platinum is "Wanted: Outlaws," with Waylon, Willie, Jessie Coulter, et. al. It is a great, great history of the genre, with many, many outfits worn by the stars (from pairs of boots worn by Hank and Bob Wills and Patsy Cline to dresses worn by Dolly and Crystal Gayle to a black outfit worn by Johnny Cash, the original man in black), plus the ability to hear some of the old recordings.

By the time we finish, we are imbued with a new sense of Nashville's importance and the key role of what may be, along with jazz, the only authentic American sound. On the way back to the hotel, we stop for a late lunch at the Palm, and I get my fix of red meat. A decent New York Strip, along with a screwdriver or two, and, hey, we've cleared out those darn spiderwebs, to say nothing of dispatching any memory of the sins of last night.

Now we gather at the Holiday Inn Express for the outing to watch the UW-Auburn battle of the bands tonight. Things quickly begin to cluster again, as the TAW's room is chosen for our official greeting place for the new arrivals: Chico and Laverne and Big Steve and the Chicago contingent, including El Tio. Time slips away along with the cocktails; Doug W is suddenly here (what is it 5 p.m. already?); I hand out the official Music City Bowl T-shirts; I get a call from Gomez but completely forget to call him back for the next two days; The Irish Mist (Yes!) is watching The Two Towers; X and his daughter return from their day of watching band practice and touring Vanderbilt; it is getting louder and less clear why we are all here in this tiny hotel room talking at the same time until we finally pull out shortly before 6 p.m. and make it to the corner of 2d and Commerce to watch thousands of fans and two college bands make a lot of music and noise.

I am pretty impressed with the battle of the bands, which UW wins handily, although the Auburn band shows signs of being a real band and not some wannabe like you sometimes see (e.g., Minnesota). We learn that playing "Rocky Top," in order to ingratiate yourself to the local Tennesseans, goes over badly, as the Auburn folks boo lustily. On the other hand, a hearty rendition of "Ring of Fire" scores points. For those like the Xette and Doug W's family, who've never seen a gathering of Badgers on the road, it proves to be an eye-opening experience.

Trying to find a place to eat, on the other hand, proves to be a problematic experience, given the thousands of folks with the same idea at the same time. After a couple of false starts, TAW and her crew head for one of the brew pubs, while the rest of us (all 16) squeeze into a place called The Drunken Fish and get a

few tables on the upper level. We devour one of the better meals of the trip (I had some trout, others the barbecued shrimp) and drink the bar out of lite beers.

"Another round of Miller Lites," says Chico.

"Uh, sorry, we're out of Miller Lites," says the slightly embarrassed waiter.

Chico has a grin of pride. "We drank them out of Millers, OK. How about Amstel Lite?"

A couple of rounds later and they are out of Amstel, then out of Sam Adams, and we're wondering what they will serve the balance of the patrons for the evening, but it is time to go anyway. We decide to hit the honky tonks from the night before in somewhat reverse order, first a place called the Stage which is crowded and loud with pretty good sound and some Auburn fans, who are decent folks. (This begins a pattern, in that Auburn fans turn out to be some of the most fun and most decent fans I've ever met on a road trip. Certainly better than other SEC fans such as those from Tennessee, Georgia or Kentucky. Wonder why they seem to be such fine folks?) The Irish Mist (Yes!) can't stand the noise and goes, along with some others, back to the hotel, but we continue our necessary assault on Legend's Corner. After the Stage, we make our way up to the Bluegrass Bar, and the music in here is much, much better, to say nothing of the three fine ladies who are the leaders of the band, but, oh, my, here are Chico and the boys and we discover they have \$1 PBRs and the night begins to get very blurry. That first PBR is a little rough, but after that they do sort of slide down, much like a Plazaburger I suppose. I swear I actually saw Chico decline a beer, but it turns out to be a false alarm. In honor of such a fine establishment -- which we now discover is connected by a back alley to the more wonderful Second Fiddle next door -- I feel it necessary to engage in the ceremonial pouring of one Lite Beer into another, followed up, I am told, later in the evening, by the pouring of one can of PBR into another.

I beg forgiveness from the beer gods, Phil and Firkin!

The band at the Second Fiddle is clearly superior to that in the Bluegrass, but now TAW and the Smilin' Engineer show up again after dropping off children and they join X and Doug and me and we have no choice but to end the evening in the world famous Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, which all agree is the top spot we've been to this evening. Again, the two bands, again, it is packed; Carl "The Traitor" Greenskeeper wanders through the crowd, informing me he is hunting Alabama tang. We end up on the dance floor of the second level, again buying shots for the band and again meeting lots of friendly folks from Auburn and I even put my name on some poster for Badger fans and for reasons that escape me and are not captured

in this reporter's notes, we leave the bar before it closes. I'm back by 1:30 a.m., but much more cogent than the prior evening, with no attempts to climb out or use windows for urinals.

Lesson to Monsignor and Smilin' Engineer: eat before you drink. I was just 13 you might say I was a musical Proverbial knee high When I heard a couple new sounding tunes on the tube And they blasted me sky high And the record man said every one is a Yellow Sun record from Nashville And up north there ain't nobody buys 'em And I said, but I will. Nashville cats....

It is New Year's Eve already. How did that happen? Egads, that means we have to get our behinds out of bed and be across the Cumberland River and into the stadium by 10:30 a.m. or thereabouts. This will present a challenge to the normally-late-sleeping Mist (Yes!), which I take on with perhaps a bit too much glee for her taste. We do get something in our stomachs and some coffee and we are on the road in sufficient time.

The Coliseum in Nashville is a good looking stadium, and the sun is out and it is expected to be in the mid-50s. I am beginning to think that all our efforts at securing a box suite for the game will go for naught; we won't be able to gloat over those sitting in the rain or cold. But once we get into the box, all such fears vanish.

"Sa-weet," intones Section X, as we try out the plush chairs and note that our host has graced us with a significant quantum of booze and beer beyond what we ordered for the game. I'd also been told to feel free to use up any leftovers in the suite, as there are no more home Titans games till fall of 2004, and as the game goes on, we are more than happy to do so. The parking passes are so good that Smilin' Engineer is right next to Pat Richter.

Everybody arrives with plenty of time to watch the UW marching band -- banned from a halftime show -- put on a pretty fun pre-game performance. Well, everybody but the effervescent Chico. For reasons that totally escape me, he decides that he will try to bring his video cam into the game. Hello? How many times do we hear "No reproduction or other account of this game....." I am sure that the Gaylord Hotels Music City Bowl Presented By Bridgestone follows the same rule. Chico does eventually get to the box, just before kickoff, with an empty video cam case.

"All I can say is, it is a good thing I don't have much of a package down here," notes El Chico as he reaches into his pants to retrieve the smuggled cam. Is there any surer sign of how aged we truly are? Yikes! We now pay to have booze delivered to our seats, and instead smuggle in video cams!?!?!

We have become our parents.

Once we have cleared out the security guys brought in by TAW's attempt to hang the Badger flag out our window, we can settle in to enjoy the reason we are in Music City: to watch the disappointment bowl, the University of Wisconsin Badgers (7-5) v. the Auburn University Tigers (7-5). The Tigers were picked by Sporting News and The NY Times to be the top college team in the country, but proceeded to lose their first two games and only save Coach Tom Tuberville's job by their season finale win over the hated Alabama Crimson Tide. The Badgers started 6-1, including that heart-thumping upset of Ohio State in the night rain at Camp Randall, ending OSU's 23 game winning streak. But Wisconsin stumbled to a 1-4 finish, dropping 3 games in the final minute and inexplicably losing to a Northwestern team they should have drubbed. Questions about the durability of such potential stars as Sorgi and Davis, as well as a propensity to play well, but not quite make the big play when needed, are hallmarks of this season's Badger edition.

The initial quarter is dominated by the defenses, and ends in a scoreless tie. The Tiges' defense is as quick as we've seen this year. Auburn puts together a TD drive, highlighted by two busted plays that gain huge yardage. The Badgers battle back with two field goals and it is 7-6 at halftime. We are relatively satisfied at the half, as we wander and spend a few minutes talking with Mooner de Lique.

I also have the enjoyment of chatting with a couple of good ol' boys bedecked in NASCAR outfits. They are from northern Tennessee.

"So you guys are up near Kentucky."

"But we ain't from Kaintucky, y'hear."

"No? What's the problem with folks from Kentucky?"

"Sheeet, boy, they still marrying they sisters up there."

Hmm..... I guess we all have to have somebody to make fun of.

Auburn takes a 14-6 lead with a decent drive, running well, although the refs miss 2 fumbles inside the ten, one of which the Badgers recover. This is the same ref crew that blew a call in the Florida/FSU game, prompting Auburn coach Tuberville to ask after the game, "And they're working a bowl game?" UW misses a big play in the third when Williams is free behind the secondary and Sorgi overshoots him.

But, as the beer begins to dwindle -- until TAW, emulating the miracle of loaves and fishes, suddenly makes more appear -- the Badgers come back in the 4th

quarter. Sorgi lofts one into the end zone that Lee Evans steals for a touchdown. A pretty 2 point conversion to Owen Daniels ties the game at 14 with 5:30 or so to play. And now the defense steps up, having Auburn with a third and 8 from the 12 yard line, but, but.....

Oh, maan.... Jimmy Leonhard jumps a route and Auburn picks up a long gain past midfield. Another long pass and AU plows it into the end zone for 21-14 lead. The Badgers then continue to crumble. Sorgi, under relentless pressure all day, gets sacked and fumbles and is out of the game and the Tigers pound it in again for a 28-14 lead.

And so it ends. Two TDs in the last 4 minutes spell doom. The Badgers go from 6-1 to 7-6, and show that this team cannot close the deal.

"In a tight game like that, you have to make those plays," says J. Barrett, King. "We had our chances and we didn't close them out."

Amen, BA, amen.

We stay for the 5th quarter, and I run into the guy who was described by my sister as having the ugliest hat she has ever seen.

"She ain't seen yer pants, then, buddy."

We wander out of the stadium, back across the Cumberland, stopping briefly at the Something-or-other River Brewery and finally go to Joe's Crab House for bad food and worse service. I do have the joy of finally meeting Combad, and in two minutes I convert him to a flaming liberal.

Our New Year's Eve ends with tickets to an excellent show at the Ryman Auditorium. Running from 8 p.m. to 12:30 a.m., I get to usher in the new year with the Irish Mist (Yes!). I'm not impressed by the first band, a jug band, although the fiddler and bass player in it are pretty good. But the Del McCoury Band, the lead band for the evening, is marvelous. Del has a country voice that can't be duplicated and has great musicians, including two McCoury family members. They are pure bluegrass, a band consisting of guitar, fiddle, bass, mandolin and banjo. When you hear Del's band perform "Nashville Cats" or "Get Down on Your Knees and Pray," you have to become a country music fan. After the show, I buy the CD with those two songs on it and get it autographed by Del.

The Ryman has the added feature of selling beer, wine, or booze, and I'm into the scotch, although after spilling one on the floor, I figure I'd better slow down. In fact, I have some hallucination of running into Badgerphil and Firkin at the Ryman, another clear sign that I'd better save a few brain cells for tomorrow.

The third band is Leftover Salmon, a large electrified band that can best be described as Bill Monroe meets Phish. Also excellent musicians, and there are all these young folks who look like Phish or Dead Heads moving toward the stage and dancing wildly, so El Tio and Senora El Tio and the Mist (Yes!) and I move upstairs where it isn't quite so loud and we can see the band through the dancing kids, and also can chat with TAW, Smilin' Engineer and X and Xette. Then both bands come out on the stage to play together and ultimately to sing "Auld Lang Syne" and bring in 2004.

This show is the highlight of the trip and we crawl back up the hill to the Holiday Inn Express, share a brief cocktail, and tumble into bed.

Great party.... but, Grrr.... They couldn't close the deal. The Irish Mist (Yes!) is despondent as her perfect road record with the Badgers has fallen to 6-1.

They couldn't close the deal.

*Well there's 16,821 mothers from Nashville
All their friends play music and
They ain't uptight if one of the kids will.
Because its custom made for any mother's son
To be a guitar picker in Nashville.
And I'm sure glad I got a chance to say
A word about the music and the
Mothers from Nashville.
Nashville cats....*

New Year's Day consists of saying goodbye to Chico, Laverne, Big Steve and crew and Sectio (where's my n) X and the Xette, as half of the troupe heads back for Chitown or Madcity. We sleep in relatively late, since the only item on our agenda today is the Rose Bowl. I read a little in the lobby and wander for a paper and eventually end up, at noon, at the Market Street Brewery, by myself. Which is what I wanted.

The Irish Mist (Yes!) eventually joins me and we have a tasty, inexpensive Mexican meal at El Rey, watching the fans gathering for a Nashville Predators v. Pittsburgh Penguins hockey game. I return to the hotel to discover that Blue Hair had a rite of passage last night.

"A rite of passage? What?" asks El Tio. "Did he meet a southern lass?"

"No, he was mixing the beer and spirits and spent several hours worshipping the porcelain god."

"Something every college student has to learn, I guess."

My nephew shows up, looking as white as a sheet. "Hey, Blue Hair boy, want some scotch?"

"Nnnn...rrr..hhhhnn," he grunts and turns away.

The H.I. Express is nothing exciting, but relatively cheap. Not as cheap, I find out later, as the place my son is staying with his buddies from the UW, which is apparently also the favorite place for several working girls to ply their trade. But the Express has a "Great Room" used for morning breakfast and is empty the rest of the day. We decide to take it over to watch the Rose Bowl, complete with munchies, beer, soda, and a Smilin' Engineer who is absolutely flying.

It seems my bro' proceeded to sit in a bar watching the early bowl games while the family shopped at the mall. He then proceeded to do his very poor imitation of Bill Clinton ad nauseum when the family returned, only to have his wife suggest that perhaps he will end up on a drive home to Wisconsin by himself.

"And this is supposed to bother me because why?"

Ouch.... Oddly enough, he's still talking smart, while his wife is upstairs. Methinks he will have numerous points to make up when, or if, he ever gets home.

Our final outing is to the renowned Flying Saucer, to which we repair for the second half of the Rose Bowl. Snuggled in behind the rehabbed Union Station, the Saucer is a marvelous pub, with many, many beers from all over the world on tap, and many more in bottles. I opt for a Yazoo Stout made right in Tennessee, while El Tio goes for the Yazoo Pale Ale. The rest of the troupe joins us for food, and we watch the mighty Michigan Wolverines look silly against the USC Trojans, clearly the best team in the country. The Smilin' Engineer is still flyin' though he calms down a bit when Mrs. Engineer drops in.

After lo these many days of late night adventures, tonight is an early one, packing up, ready to hit the road in the morning.

Which we do, another day of goodbyes to the family, TAW and Smilin' Engineer, and leaving El Tio and Senora El Tio to spend a couple more days in Music City on their own. We cruise through Vanderbilt and past the Parthenon, and are smart enough to take the shorter route back, avoiding the traffic and rainstorms we hit coming down, stopping in Paducah to taste that indescribable southern cuisine found in a Waffle House, but otherwise on the road again, listening to the unusual collection of C&W songs I put together for this trip, suffering those honky tonkin' Nashville cat freezin' pigskin bustin' blues all the way back to Madcity.

*Hank Williams' widow married
Johnny Horton ("North to Alaska"),
who also died tragically.*

--Handwritten note left (inexplicably) under my Nashville hotel room door.

-The Monsignor

1/12/04