

My Story – by Kevin McNevins

When I graduated from Notre Dame on June 4, 1967, I don't think I truly understood what the future held for me. I don't even recall considering a return to campus after the demanding 21 credit hours I completed in my last semester. I needed at least a "D" in Business Finance and was uncertain about graduating on time. Additionally, there were many other uncertainties that year, particularly the looming shadow of Vietnam and the draft, which posed significant questions about my future and its duration.

There wasn't much time or motivation to consider the options for a triumphant return. I envisioned various scenarios: perhaps arriving in a limo for a Southern Cal game as a highly successful alum, or returning as a guest lecturer in my chosen field—whatever that might ultimately be. I dreamed of the possibility of being honored as a prize winner, maybe a Nobel Prize or an Oscar. However, whatever fantasies I entertained, the reality of my return to campus on November 5, 1971, would turn out to be far beyond anything I could have imagined.

After surviving two years at Fort Hood in Texas instead of Vietnam, I began my career in Big 8 Accounting with Touche Ross in my hometown of Dallas. Life was taking shape just like the movie "The Notre Dame Successful Alumnus," starring me. I was living in a swinging singles apartment complex and driving a new Buick Skylark convertible, which meant things were going well.

Then, in August 1970, I was blindsided when I heard the personnel partner say, "We're going to have to let you go." The booming years were coming to an end, and the largest CPA firms were experiencing unprecedented cutbacks, reducing their sizes by half. After trying to console the partner by assuring him I would be okay, I realized I had to move forward, even though I felt unprepared to reconstruct my life at the age of 24.

My best friend from high school was really passionate about music, so after earning a degree in Mechanical Engineering and receiving a high draft number, he decided to leave Texas Instruments. He ventured into the music industry by starting a company that provided quality sound equipment for rock bands. His partner had previously produced the Texas Pop Festival, a massive event similar to Woodstock in 1969, which helped them establish great contacts with major touring acts. They successfully secured commitments from bands like Three Dog Night and others for upcoming tours. At that time, my friend was in Detroit with Led Zeppelin, preparing to kick off a tour when he learned that I was "on the market" for new opportunities. Since I had helped him build the P.A. systems in his garage, he invited me to join him on the tour. I happily accepted the offer and went along.

I had a fantastic time touring with Led Zeppelin, learning to drive a C50 Chevy 5-ton truck named "Loretta." It had a sleeper, and I got the hang of setting up the gear, managing the enthusiastic fans swarming the stage, and driving all night to the next gig. After a month on the road, I realized it was time to return to my "career."

I decided to try real estate and even obtained a license. However, within a year, I faced another surprise when I discovered that my broker had become, as Peter Sellers described General Jack D. Ripper in **Dr. Strangelove**, "... a little funny in the head." He went on to commit armed robbery at a national bank, resulting in a shootout with the sheriff, hostage-taking, and ultimately a 17-year prison sentence.

I found myself back on the market, feeling slightly disillusioned about pursuing a career in real estate. At the same time, Led Zeppelin was getting ready for another tour. I put on my jeans and harness boots and hit the road. The 1971 Zeppelin tour exceeded my expectations, especially when they performed "Stairway to Heaven" – they were undeniably the biggest band in the world at that time. I even got the guys to sign a pound note, which has become a treasured keepsake for me.

Following that, James Taylor began a college tour arranged by Peter Asher, who was known from the duo Peter and Gordon. I embarked on another magical mystery tour, traveling from Williamsburg, VA to San Diego over the span of a month, filled with unforgettable memories and fantastic music. After James, Peter Asher organized a tour for Cat Stevens, who was riding high on his album successes. We started another hectic itinerary in Syracuse toward the end of October. Cat Stevens' real name is Steven Demetre Georgiou, and while he had a bit of a temperamental side, he was perfectly fine with being called "Steve" by the road crew.

He had some peculiar stage mannerisms, bobbing his head up and down and side to side while simultaneously trying to signal volume adjustments to the mixer with his movements—an impossible task. Tension was often high, and by the time we reached the Chicago Auditorium on November 4th, we had seen enough of Steve's temper. One member of the crew even quit the tour after narrowly dodging a Coke bottle that Steve threw in a rage during a show.

On another occasion, Steve exploded during a sound check when he returned from a break and discovered that he thought his leather coat was missing. He screamed into the microphone, "SOME ***** **** HAS NICKED MY JACKET!" The outburst echoed through the hall, startling the T-shirt vendors and concessionaires who were warming hot dogs for the show. I believe it even caught the attention of passersby on the streets of Downtown Cleveland. Moments later, a roadie brought his jacket back from the dressing room where he had left it. Steve's response was simply, "Oh. Good."

On November 5th, we drove Loretta down the Indiana Turnpike and took a familiar exit. I knew the way to Joyce ACC and was contemplating how to introduce myself. I didn't look very prosperous in my work gloves and boots, and I felt a bit ashamed of my circumstances, so I downplayed my status as a returning alum. I mentioned it to a couple of the kids who were helping with the setup and to the crew, and they helped me get the job done, but I didn't tell Steve.

After the setup, I walked around the campus and noticed Steve being escorted. I hoped he would get to see the Grotto, but then again, he had always been ambivalent about his

early Catholic upbringing. His father was Greek Orthodox and his mother was Swedish Baptist, and they divorced when he was young. At that time, he was exploring all religions. I wasn't particularly impressed with his depth or sincerity, as I had my own journey to focus on.

The show went well, and we had to hurry after the second encore because we had a nine-hour drive to make it to Washington, D.C., for our performance at the Kennedy Center the next day. The tour pharmacist had prescribed me two white cross pills for alertness, and I didn't blink until sunrise as we crossed into Maryland along the beautiful Potomac River Valley.

After our time in Washington, we headed to Atlanta. By then, we were all pretty tired of Steve. I remember getting into a car with him and some crew members when "Peace Train" came on the radio. It was particularly funny when someone broke the awkward silence by saying, "Push the damn button!" Even Steve had to laugh at that.

We managed to avoid a close call when we had another all-nighter on the road. The following evening, we learned that Steve and several members of the band, along with the crew, had contracted a case of carnal flu from one of the more hospitable women in Atlanta. As a result, nobody was drinking for the next few days, which helped us get through Jackson, Dallas, Denver, and Thanksgiving at a Denny's in the Rockies on our way to San Jose.

During the overnight drive from San Jose to Los Angeles, I was struggling to stay awake when something caught my attention: we came across an overturned car on the Interstate, its wheels still spinning. I got out, grabbed a blanket to cover the driver lying on the pavement, and set up flares as traffic slowly passed through the broken glass. Someone eventually found the passenger fifty feet away in a ditch. Some memories are ones you wish to forget.

Finally, the tour came to an end with two nights at L.A.'s famous Greek Theater, and we were pretty happy about it. Steve had a last freak-out when one of the many gifts sent backstage was a small sculpture of a cat with Steve's head on it. He exclaimed, "That's creepy," and then went out to put on a couple of great shows. This was our final gig with opening acts Tom Jans and Mimi Farina, who is Joan Baez's sister and the widow of Richard, the author of "Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me." We really liked them. Larry Steele, the friendly Jamaica-born bass player, had become a friend and wore my Army fatigue shirt on stage for the last performances.

This was our experience with Cat Stevens. We ended the night with dinner with Steve, which typically included a tantrum when the famous vegetarian couldn't get a steak. "This is bloody HAMBURGER!" he exclaimed at a fancy chopped steak specialty place on the Sunset Strip. He mellowed a bit afterward and made a promotional visit for A&M Records at the Whisky A Go Go. Then we headed to the Troubadour, where we saw John Prine perform "You Never Even Called Me By My Name," years before it became a hit for David Allan Coe.

Afterward, we all went to an upscale yet sleazy joint on the Sunset Strip, where we witnessed a live show featuring "Raul and The Sensuous Woman" performing "The Dance of Love"—pretty erotic stuff for the time. I remember picking up the tab with my Diner's Club Card, and after we all hugged goodbye, I think Steve went to a Laurel and Hardy film festival while I retired to the Hyatt Sunset Strip, alone.

Following my time with Cat Stevens, I joined Alice Cooper's December tour, which was also a lot of fun and concluded in Ottawa with two feet of snow after a six-band New Year's show in Toronto. After that, we packed our gear and voltage transformers for "Jesus Christ Superstar" in Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, finishing on Good Friday, forty-two years ago last week. When I returned to the country, I took over the accounting department for Showco, Inc., a small company that was rapidly becoming a major player in the rock industry.

Over the next six years, we grew to become the largest and best tour sound and lighting company in the business, having incredible adventures while working exclusively with the Rolling Stones, Paul McCartney and Wings, Eric Clapton, David Bowie, and others all over the world. We invented a portable lighting rig called the Vari-Lite, which revolutionized stage lighting, winning an Emmy in 1978. We performed more than 10,000 live gigs with over 500 employees in the following ten years and eventually went public in 1990. I finished my tour as Treasurer in 1977 but remained close to the company and always appreciated my time there. I loved the nights spent cruising with the warm glow of Loretta's clearance lights, the powerful, muted roar of the V-8 engine, and James Taylor on the tape player, where a job well done was a simple and clear good show.

I often reflect on the quirky beginnings of things that grow large and famous. I liked Led Zeppelin and Alice Cooper and loved James Taylor, but I never felt warm about Cat Stevens. I wasn't surprised when he made headlines after being denied entry to the U.S. in 2004 as Yusef Islam. I wondered if I had taken him to the Grotto that crisp night in November 1971, he might have seen a reflection of his better self, and perhaps some things could have been different.

I've returned to Notre Dame many times since then—as Dallas Club President and an Award of the Year recipient—attending Southern Cal games (still no limo), and most recently at the 45th reunion in 2012. That was when I suffered a stroke, and thankfully, I ended up in a different hospital than George Gipp. I'm better than ever today, but they say you always remember your first experiences. I'll always remember the time Steve and I spent at Notre Dame.

After the Cat Stevens tour in November 1971 ended, I switched rigs and joined Chuck Webster as the engineer for the Alice Cooper tour, starting in New Orleans. This was the tour for the "Killer" album, which included the shocking number "Dead Babies," featuring Alice chopping up a doll on stage and then being executed by hanging on a 15-foot gallows, complete with a working trap door and impressive lighting and sound

effects. It was quite a spectacle and worked flawlessly—except for one incident when the wire attached to Alice’s harness vest snapped, causing him to fall all the way to the floor. He flailed his arms and banged his head as the lights were quickly turned off. However, he collected himself like a true professional and returned strutting in white tails and a top hat for the big finale of “Still Got A Long Way To Go.”

Despite the intense performance, they were a nice group offstage and really worked hard to deliver an entertaining show.

Chuck and I didn’t see eye to eye, though. He had a rather inflated sense of self-importance and sported a fringed jacket reminiscent of Buffalo Bill or George Custer, complete with long blond curls and a flowing mustache. He claimed to never make mistakes and would often throw a tantrum if a truck stop didn’t have chocolate milk. He liked to play a Jack Nicholson-style routine with the waitresses, insisting they must have chocolate syrup or cocoa stashed away somewhere in the kitchen. After the fifth incident, I learned to ignore him. Eventually, Chuck moved on to tour with the Carpenters, and I wasn’t surprised to hear he ended up in the hospital with an ulcer.

We headed north through December and had a close call in Kansas with the “Percy” truck nearly failing. We performed with Arlo Guthrie in an old movie theater in Lawrence, where both Arlo and Ry Cooder were dissatisfied with the monitor mix, following what had been set up in the Armory in Orlando. Next, we went to Kansas City, where I ran into Suzy Schmidt from the old days. I also had an amusing evening at a Chalet Club, where I unexpectedly found my brother-in-law’s name and phone number scrawled in the men’s room “for a good time.” We then played in St. Louis, where I experienced the loudest band I had ever heard—“Dust”—who only needed vocal and drum mics. They had stacked quad Marshall amps on one side and quad Ampeg bass amps on the other, creating vibrations so intense that everything on the monitor table danced during their set.

We performed at a Toledo hockey rink with REO Speedwagon and in Cleveland with J. Geils and Sha Na Na. Following our December 19th show at Cobo Hall in Detroit, we had a break before our next performance on the 27th in Cherry Hill, NJ. The band traveled to Miami, leaving Chuck eager to get back to Dallas to celebrate Christmas with his beautiful wife and stepsons. He was understandably upset when our break was nearly derailed by a side trip to do sound for Bloodrock at the annual formal “Snowball” at the old Buffalo Hilton on December 22nd. We were then scheduled to do another Bloodrock show in Cherry Hill on the 26th. Although Showco offered to fly us home to Dallas for Christmas, we needed to get the truck to Philadelphia overnight, allowing us to make the rest of the itinerary work.

This was when I really stepped up.

I volunteered to take the truck to Philadelphia alone, allowing Chuck to change his flights and head home to Dallas from Buffalo. I flew to Dallas on Christmas Eve, only to discover that no one was home—my brother and his wife had gone to Lubbock, and the

friend I had parked my things with was in Fort Worth with his mother. I ended up going to Denny's for a meal and then flew back to Philadelphia with Chuck on December 26th.

Our Cherry Hill show was canceled, so we headed north, possibly to Pittsburgh or New Haven (which was also canceled), and then to Ottawa, where we faced a blizzard for our December 30 show, arriving at the Ottawa Hockey Stadium amidst two feet of snow. Since Alice Cooper's plane couldn't land, we ended up performing with the local band opening the show. We then traveled to Toronto for a New Year's Eve show that featured six bands and went on until 2 or 3 AM. The stagehands were quite inebriated and swept all the microphone cables into a pile, which led to the theft of my Gibson LG-1 from the truck. After loading everything back up, we drove back to Ottawa for a make-up gig, exhausted. That marked the end of my time on the Alice Cooper tour.

I began preparing for the next leg of my career, which involved joining Kirby Wyatt's National Rock Opera company tour of Jesus Christ Superstar in mid-January.

... and that's the rest of the story. – Kevin McNevins