

# REAGAN at the Show (!)

By Bill COLE

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Bill Cole's "Reagan at the Show," is one of those brilliant, comedic juxtapositions that should make everyone happier for having read it.*

*He rolls with concept as Saunders would or Vonnegut does with Mother Night, his style is sly and creative as if Douglas Adams were sitting right in front of you and playing word games, and he crafts as good a metaphor as Richard Brautigan could pull off any day of the week.*

*This is clever at its most clever.*

*I won't get into the plot too much because it spoils the fun. Suffice to say, Reagan enjoys punk rock music.*

*When I lived in Illinois, we would drive to other local small towns for football games, traveling to grandma's house, and etc. – hills and corn shit. Yet, always, on the way back and forth from college I/we would invariably go through Dixon, IL – a small ass town that could boast about having an interesting bridge and the fact that Ronald Reagan was born there (if you went North and towards Iowa you could see where Grant lived in Galena, IL...woot). In Dixon, there are pictures of young Reagan throwing footballs, getting ready to go to California and be a star, I'm sure that his face is painted as a mural on the side of a main street building, you get the point: he lived there.*

*The great part about Cole's story is how he takes a man who I not only had to grow up with historically but also one that, as an adult, I've pretty much hated for his policies and turned him into the mythos of a cowboy that he may or may not have always wanted. Hiding from cops in a van, strumming his head along to Creedance, he may as well have been the Dude as opposed to the president.*

*If only he had been the Dude as opposed to the president.*

*If only he had been Ronnie.*

*I cannot stress enough how much you should read this story. It is a romp worth romping through. It's like the end of Once Upon a Time in Hollywood, I wanted that story to be true as opposed to reality.*

*A punk-rock fairy tale that crushes it.*

*Good work, Cole.*

*Five Stars.*

## QUALITY QUOTABLES *(for the love of language)*...

The songs came and went, like a succession of tiny explosions. D. Boon shouted word fragments into his microphone, jiggling and gyrating from one side of the stage to the other, a frenetic data point on an unsettled axis.

The Minutemen sat in a transporting silence.

D. Boon gave a burdened whistle.

“You see, we’re like a book of matches and you’re the striking strip. We need your friction if we’re going to ignite and burn. Otherwise, we’re just sticks of dull cardboard,” said Mike Watt.

## Reagan at the Show

The crowd was a tangled mass seeking to sand down their tensions and sanctify their joy. The 40<sup>th</sup> President of the United States was no exception in this regard. It was a frigid Thursday night in Washington D.C. when the Minutemen took the stage at the 9:30 Club. The temperatures outside had plunged since New Year’s Eve three days earlier, but it was sweltering inside the club as the punk rock band from San Pedro tore into their set.

D. Boon, the portly but nimble guitarist, hopped to the front of the stage and leaned backwards on a diagonal, his body balanced on a fulcrum of uplifted palms. Ronald Reagan, the aged but nimble president, pogoed and ricocheted off of the people on each side of him with a festive belligerence. The flailing droves surrounding the 70-something Commander-in-Chief were impervious to their distinguished neighbor, senses obscured by the sonic dust kicked up by the punk trio. D. Boon strummed the piercing treble out of his Telecaster through the accented quirks from Mike Watt's bass and George Hurley's drums. The songs came and went, like a succession of tiny explosions. D. Boon shouted word fragments into his microphone, jiggling and gyrating from one side of the stage to the other, a frenetic data point on an unsettled axis.

Between songs, Mike Watt stepped up to his microphone. "You know it's real cold, but we're boiling. D. Boon almost had a stroke," he quipped to the rabid crowd.

The Minutemen played on.

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There was a knock outside the Minutemen's dressing room in the 9:30 Club's basement where the band was unwinding after their set. A roadie wearing a partially tucked flannel shirt opened the door. It was Ronald Reagan, veiled in a hooded navy sweatshirt.

"Hey boys, great show!" he said as he entered the room.

"Thanks for coming out, Mr. President," said D. Boon as the men shook hands.

"Yeah, thanks so much for bein' here," added Mike Watt.

"Please call me Ronnie. I was wondering if I could possibly get a lift back to the White House with you boys. It's only a couple of miles from here."

The Minutemen gave cryptic looks to one another. “Sure, we can give you a ride back, but don’t you have secret service or something?” D. Boon asked as he wiped the sweat from his bald head before working his way down his face to stroke his short-cropped goatee.

“Aw, shucks, I excused them from their duties when I got to the club. Had to have an unfettered experience.” Ronald Reagan pulled off his hood revealing a fresh welt on his left cheek.

“That’s some thump you got there,” said the scruffy roadie, pointing to his own face as an illustration.

“Yeah, I caught a hard elbow during *Anxious Mo-Fo*.”

“Oooh, that’s a bummer,” George Hurley uttered.

Let’s get you some ice for that.” said Mike Watt, as the lanky bassist jumped up and poured out a bunch of ice cubes from a nearby cup into a plastic bag before wrapping it into a makeshift ice pack and handing it to Ronald Reagan.

“Thanks. For the ice and the ride,” Ronald Reagan responded, placing the bag of ice up to his cheek as the Minutemen started preparing to bring their belongings out to their van.

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“What’d you think of our covers of Creedence and the Blue Oyster Cult, Ronnie?” Mike Watt asked from the front passenger seat turning his head behind him. Ronald Reagan was seated next to George Hurley in the rear seats as D. Boon steered the band’s van down 9<sup>th</sup> Street NW, the band’s gear stacked toward the back like a warm huddle of sleeping children.

“You definitely did them justice.”

Mike Watt was beaming from the compliment. “Yeah, they were okay, there were a few clams in there,” he said.

“If there were, I didn’t notice. It all sounded pretty tight to me. And I’ll tell you this, I really loved your version of *Hey Good Lookin’*. I’ve been a big fan of Hank Williams ever since my days in the pictures.”

“We thought you might like that. We played that for you on the sly,” said George Hurley.

“Gee, boys, what a kind gesture. You’re gonna make a right at this corner and stay on I Street.”

“Okay. By the way, we dug your spiel today on African food aid. That was pretty boss, boss,” offered D. Boon with a proud grin. “Now if we can just pull the plug on those Contras.”

Ronald Reagan grabbed the back of the driver’s seat and pulled himself forward. “I’ll have you know they have been fine allies to us during an excruciatingly difficult time,” Ronald Reagan firmly but calmly asserted within inches of D. Boon’s ear.

“I guess that’s the price of paradise,” stated D. Boon with an acid tone, his bandmates nodding in unison.

“Listen, I really do respect you boys and there is something that’s been on my mind lately that I would very much value your input on,” Ronald Reagan said with an increasingly severe voice.

D. Boon quizzically cocked his head to the side “Well, that’s real flattering, Mr. Reagan.”

“Ronnie. Please,” Ronald Reagan interjected.

“Sorry. It is a flattering thing to hear, Ronnie. We can try to be helpful, but at the end of the day we’re just a coupla corn dogs from Pedro.”

“Well, we do have those California ties in common. That’s worth something. What I’m about to say is probably not what you think,” Ronald Reagan proceeded. The Minutemen sat in a transporting silence. “Now, I believe you may know that I’m a cowboy at heart, right?”

“Sure, everyone knows that about you, Ronnie,” said George Hurley, whipping back the shock of hair hanging over his face.

“And, when you get down to it, your music is cowboy music.”

The Minutemen let out a collective giggle striped with embarrassment. “I think that’s the first time anyone’s characterized our sound that way,” Mike Watt said with a toothy smirk to D. Boon, who started humming the theme to *Bonanza*.

“It really is. All good punk is. Your music perfectly captures the spirit of the cowboy ethos: freedom, rugged self-reliance, purity, small government.”

“That’s one way to look at it,” said D. Boon.

“And, if I’m going to truly walk the walk, I’m gonna have to walk away from politics and live on the open road, take to the wild frontier.”

“What are you sayin,’ Ronnie?” Mike Watt asked.

“I’m saying I want to resign from this job and devote myself fully to the punk rock mission.”

“But you just won re-election,” said D. Boon.

“Yeah, I was thinking about that very thing. To avoid a constitutional crisis, I would wait until after the inauguration in a few weeks and then make my announcement. George can take over from there.”

George Hurley’s eyebrows shot upward. “Huh?!”

“Oh, don’t worry Georgie. I meant George Bush. The world needs you behind the drum kit.” All four men chuckled. “Then, I could jump in the van with you guys full-time, set up your equipment, sell merchandise, that kind of stuff. Whatever you need, really.”

Mike Watt looked at D. Boon, who glanced away from the road to look back at Mike Watt. Nobody said anything for several seconds.

“Well, Ronnie, we already got some dudes who set up our gear and handle our merch,” Mike Watt finally replied.

“Then, I can help you navigate the red tape of the venues. I know a thing or two about diplomacy. Just ask Margaret Thatcher.”

“Have you talked to Nancy about this idea of yours?” asked D. Boon.

“Of course, she is very supportive. She has trust that it will bring my life new meaning. Her only condition is no mohawk.”

“Yeah, well that’s so 1981, anyway.” said George Hurley.

“Have you told anyone else besides Nancy about this?” D. Boon continued.

“Come again?” Ronald Reagan craned his neck forward to better hear.

“Have you run this plan by anybody else?” George Hurley reiterated.

“So, truth be told, I might have vaguely eluded to it in my phone call with King Juan Carlos of Spain earlier tonight. But, I didn’t really elaborate on it too much.” Mike Watt sighed.

D. Boon gave a burdened whistle. George Hurley tapped out a quick drum beat on his lap.

“Ronnie, you need to think about something with this whole thing that I’m not sure you’re factoring in,” D. Boon stated.

“What’s that?”

“Punk music only comes alive when it’s reacting against something. Now, for better or worse, you are a colossal representation of that something” said D. Boon.

“He is *the* colossal representation,” Mike Watt reinforced. D. Boon rolled his eyes.

“Hmm. Yeah, I haven’t really considered that.”

“You see, we’re like a book of matches and you’re the striking strip. We need your friction if we’re going to ignite and burn. Otherwise, we’re just sticks of dull cardboard,” said Mike Watt.

“Right, by eliminating myself as a symbolic foil, I effectively compromise the integrity of the entire endeavor,” Ronald Reagan mused, talking more to himself than to the Minutemen.

“Yup,” said D. Boon, as Mike Watt and George Hurley murmured in agreement.

“I get it. I need to fall on the sword for the greater good. This is my *raison d’etre* and I will take satisfaction in knowing I’m inspiring the scene from the reverse direction.”

“That kind of angle is a pretty punk thing in itself, Ronnie,” exclaimed Mike Watt.

Just then D. Boon saw the blaze of police lights filling up his mirror. “Aw, shit!” he snapped. “Ronnie, you may want to lay low on this one.”

D. Boon pulled off to the side of I Street with the police car sticking close behind. He exhaled deeply as a shadowy police officer walked over to D. Boon’s window with another officer following. Ronald Reagan slid the hood of his sweatshirt back over his head and slumped down in his seat in an attempt to will himself invisible.

“Evening, officers,” D. Boon said softly through the stinging chill of the air.

“Where ya’ll headed tonight,” grunted the lead officer poking his flashlight through the window, his eyes scanning the inside of the van.

“Just taking our friend home.”

“Yeah, where’s that?”

“Not too far, just down the road a bit.”

“Where exactly is down the road?”

“Y’know, just a short way from here.” D. Boon attempted to maintain his composure, but was straining to coax the proper words into existence.

“Why are you being so dodgy? What are you hiding?” The lead officer punctuated his questions with a shake of his flashlight across D. Boon’s face. A feeling of emerging dread started filling the van. “You sloppy dirtbags looked suspicious from the minute I spotted you on the road. Now, I’ll ask you one more time, where does your friend live?”

Suddenly, Ronald Reagan lurched forward, throwing the hood off his head. “1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.”

The officer moved his flashlight into Ronald Reagan’s face and stumbled backward. “No need to get insulting fellas,” Ronald Reagan continued. “The boys are from out of town just enjoying the sights. We like our visiting guests to feel welcome here, don’t we?”

“Yes, of course, sir. It is an honor, sir,” the lead officer acceded, the words pulled out of his mouth by gravity. The second officer stood motionless behind him.

“Very well, then. You have yourselves a good night and keep up the good work.”

“Thank you, sir. We will,” replied the lead officer as he pitched a salute toward the van.

“You have a good night, too,” the second officer added.

“That was pretty slick, Ronnie. I was pinching a brick over here,” said George Hurley as D. Boon pulled the van back on to I Street.

“I guess that power trip thing can come in handy sometimes,” Mike Watt proffered.

Ronald Reagan shrugged his shoulders. “So, boys, I actually do have one more favor to ask when we get back to the White House,” he said with a sheepish smile.

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The Minutemen were tuning up their instruments in a corner of the East Room of the White House. Ronald Reagan sat cross-legged on a nearby chair, holding to his cheek an ice pack embossed with a presidential seal.

“Ronnie, you gonna swing by and see our musical brethren Black Flag when they come to town in a few months?” asked Mike Watt. “Their singer is a hometown boy.”

“Oh yeah? What’s his name again?”

“Henry Rollins,” Mike Watt and D. Boon simultaneously replied, as if in a race.

“Well, If I’m home at the time, I’m there.”

“That’s the spirit.” D. Boon flashed Ronald Reagan a thumbs-up. “It’s real good we’re able to find some shared ground despite any differences we may have.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” said Ronald Reagan. “I was just talking with Tip O’Neil earlier today about the importance of reaching across the aisle.”

“And sometimes, moshin’ across the aisle,” added Mike Watt with a hint of mischief in his eye.

“Now, you sure we’re not gonna wake up Nancy?” asked D. Boon.

“Nah, I told you, she sleeps like a log.” The Minutemen tipped their heads in approval. “I’ll bet you know what song I hope you’ll start with, right?”

“Yeah, we think so. And, it’s okay that that particular spiel doesn’t portray you in the best of lights?” D. Boon posed cautiously.

“Sure, it’s okay. I know you guys are just making an artistic statement. We all have our part to play.”

You know, Ronnie, for a corn dog, you’re not such a bad cat,” said Mike Watt.

“Well I’m awfully fond of you boys, too.”

“Hey, I hate to come off as rude but any chance we could get a little chow when we’re done playing? We’re usually pretty hungry after a gig,” floated D. Boon.

“I’m sure we can whip something up for you boys. How does a piece of apple pie with a side of jelly beans sound?” As Ronald Reagan finished his suggestion a nearby aide instinctively reacted to the prompt and headed out of the room.

“Just perfect, Ronnie.” stated D. Boon.

D. Boon began running his fingers across the strings of his Telecaster before unloading the opening notes of one of the earlier songs from the Minutemen’s catalog, *If Reagan Played Disco*, as Mike Watt and George Hurley joined in accordingly. The sitting president looked on in delight.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *On January 3, 1985, the punk rock band Minutemen actually played the 9:30 Club in Washington, D.C., while President Reagan was at home in the White House less than two miles away. Add a pinch of magic and stir frequently.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** My work has been published in *Eclectica*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *California Quarterly*, *Lowestoft Chronicle* and *Crack The Spine*, and I have twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. My fiction has also appeared in *Highlights for Children Magazine* for which I received their Pewter Plate Award as Author of the Month. Additionally, my fiction has been made into a podcast with Manawaker Studios.