


Be Famous And Die



[Recording begins. A metallic slicing. It's the sound of a zippo lighter opening and closing. Underneath it, the hum of outside air against the microphone.]

You want a cigarette? No? What, you want that final five minutes stuck on the end of your lifetime?

Smoke. You need the practice. Smoke one way and I can guarantee you'll be asked to play a nazi torturer in a major motion picture. Smoke another way and you'll land a three-book deal. If you smoke just right you'll be fronting a band that can barely hold their instruments but have great fucking hair. This warning label? It's the first contract you sign. Now they've got these pictures. Medical photographs. Diseased lungs, wet aneurysms. You know they'd enlist the ghosts of cancer victims if they could. They'd use ouija boards to stuff them into the softpack and wail warnings when the plastic comes off.

[Crumpling of plastic, two taps, faint hiss of a cigarette burning.]

Your face slapped on glossy magazine covers? Why not? This is Melbourne, and even our famous are only half famous. TV Week famous. Our award shows look like the little sisters of Oscar nights, falling down in too much lipstick and heels four sizes too big. It's not that I'm jealous. I've already had my share of red carpet under my feet.

[A long inhalation. Exhalation. Recording ends.]

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[Recording begins. A guttural industrial sound is overwhelming. A coffee grinder. It ceases, revealing café chitchat underneath.]

- no, it's not about me. It's not a fucking autobiography. No one cares how I got my first bicycle. It's a game. I won't say my name out loud. You pretend you don't know it. Let's all just keep our names to ourselves.

When I can't sleep, and walk around the city, there's just the occasion giggle or point or wave from strangers to keep me company. I have favourite neon signs. The ones that look best at three in the morning; the ones missing letters, like a scrabble game that just doesn't give a fuck; the ones that best paint car windows and wet concrete in their colours. I like how it just takes one crack and all that's left are shards of glass and invisible gas.

[Quick bell-sounds of a spoon on glass, then it clattering onto a saucer.]

Not like statues. The only statues around Melbourne now are of politicians whose names ring faint, primary-school bells in your head. They're just something to eat lunch underneath. We don't care who they are. They're shade.

Go up to Collins Street tomorrow. Not the end with delusions of grandeur and fairy lights in the trees. (If it could talk, it'd have one of those

affected accents morons get after spending two weeks backpacking in Europe.) No, go down the other end and you'll see a statue of a man looking kind of ridiculous. This is the man who founded Melbourne. You know his name?

It's Batman.

John Batman, anyway. Still, it makes reading about him surreal. "According to Batman's diary..." and "When Batman first planted his feet on the shore..." and "Managing to found a major Australian city and foil the schemes of villainous Mister Freeze..." I'd know a lot more local history if it came out once a month filled with biffs and pows and kablams! No. This Batman - our Batman - was put on trial for war crimes by a local Koori group in the early 90s.

[The above becomes distant, the microphone presumably following. The air pressure shifts, moving inside to outside. Traffic fights down his words.]

You know the difference between a statue and an effigy? One burns.

I won't tell you all the awful things he did. Go stand underneath him and see if you can see the crimes in his chiselled eyes. The statue had a sign hung round his neck for every offense committed and never once flinched. Everybody's brave, cast in stone. At least he doesn't have that crown of metal spikes they use to keep pigeons from nesting. It

looks like it'd hurt, but hell, supposedly horses don't mind their metal shoes, either. He won't win in the end. He's fighting a war with Melbourne weather. In a thousand years, when the name underneath has worn away to nothing, to nobody, there'll just be an anonymous, granite skeleton, pecked away by wind and rain.

And he still won't deserve to share a fucking name with the real Batman.

[All other sound is buried under blaring car horns. Recording ends.]

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[Recording begins. The voice more quiet, inside. Other indistinct voices mumble in the background.]

Sometimes I think that we have it wrong, this battle with our pigeons. The birds flutter around the statues like their final thoughts and regrets, never able to settle or resolve. Like the last things you think before you go to sleep at night, catching on the edges of your consciousness and jerking you awake.

A tip: alcohol thickens the walls of your hotel room. It's the pointless intimacy of city life - you never even see your neighbours but you hear them shower and piss. A really cheap hotel, or a badly made block, is like living inside someone else's migraine. Paper-thin skulls. The street noise

outside turns shrill and panicked the longer you lie there. By 2am, I can snap myself awake with the slightest tremor or twitch. In the city, in the dark, I feel like I'm made up of my body's cracks and whistles and the scrape of my own teeth.

[The mumbling increases in volume. It's a television set. The voices change as channels flick by, leaving half-second silences between them.]

It's why I'd never want to be there at my own funeral. Worms and dirt would be poor insulation. More like bathtub water up over the ears. I used to think that I deserved a pretty death and an open casket, but it's too late for that. No. You'd just hear your eulogy translated into mumbling. What? Speak up? Oh, you're dead, you can't make demands! And god, this would be people saying nice things about you...

[The television drones on to itself, louder now, until recording ends.]

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[Recording begins. The flat tone that precedes the closing of automatic doors. A train, leaving a station. He speaks loudly and clearly to be heard.]

- you're shopping at the Queen Victoria market. You're buying one of those tasty Greek donuts. Oh, and you're standing right where Melbourne's first graveyard used to be. They say they moved all the bodies, but there's no way they got everything.

Once the dead are in the ground, they want to seep through their coffins, meet other corpses doing the same. You know, socialize. To the leftover dead, you'd be a jet engine and a rock concert and a thousand newborns crying at once. They'd be jerked awake every time they heard their precious names being applied to one of the strangers, above ground, breathing the air that used to be theirs.

[The train comes to rest. The doors open. Distorted voices bark through distant speakers before they close again.]

Do you read the Odd Spots in the paper? There's one every day. They mostly come from overseas places with funny names, and they're often about someone's stupid and hilarious death. It could happen to anyone. A good death is dying young, in a sports car, with just enough suspicion to keep people talking. If you happen to - I don't know - be unexpectedly eaten by a crocodile in an antique store, you'll suddenly be famous for about 90 seconds and five centimetres squared. They don't include the names because that makes it easier to laugh at them. These are stupid deaths.

A good death comes with sacrifice. You need to see Melbourne like a tourist, or better, yeah, a tourist in a souvenir T-shirt store. We just don't have the landmarks. Sydney has them all. Opera houses, harbour bridges. They're not famous like Mickey Mouse ears, but the general shapes are known round the world. Our Arts Spire might be pretty, but it lights up. If your landmarks have to

light up, maybe they're trying too hard. A dozen workers, more, died building the Harbour Bridge. Maybe our landmarks just need blood before -

[The train-sound muffles itself around his voice, sinking into what must be a tunnel. Recording ends.]

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[Recording begins. A soft creaking sits around his voice, kept low.]

In the early 90s, two cops were called to a circus that'd just arrived in Melbourne. No surprises there. Circuses employ men with no real homes and lean strips of muscle from hauling around clowns all day. The owner says it's the lion, this is terrible, they can get sick, we're full of disease. The cops, inevitably, find a lion, still in its cage, eating a human corpse.

They notice a neatly-folded pile of clothes sitting just outside. There's a T-shirt that says TAO MI KARATE SCHOOL and a wallet full of ID. The cops also notice that blood's been collecting on their shoes all morning. They go to the karate school and ask the teacher if the dead man was a student, if he had seemed depressed lately, and they're told, no, he was a very proud young man. He believed in the teachings of the school. One such teaching says that if you meet a lion you should 'appreciate its strength'. And, in turn, it would look you up and down, its breath heavy with meat - and if your

breath was free of nervous exhalation, you would part ways as equals. The karate teacher shook his head. "It was a metaphor," he says.

[The creaking is perhaps the sound of new leather being worn for the first time. An audible swallowing, and then glass breaking, a few feet from the microphone.]

That story is true, in case you were wondering. It doesn't matter. Jesus lied all the time. He just called them parables and no one seemed to mind.

In Melbourne, we wear black. We're famous for it. It's a joke around the country. I've heard a couple of different reasons for this, over the years, but we'll never know the truth. It's like wearing ties to work, or shaking hands. Leftover rituals from another time that we act out every day without thinking. We wear black and we don't even know what we're mourning. Johnny Cash said he'd wear black until there was no more injustice in the world and fuck it, we're not so profound.

[The whirring of the zippo wheel moving along denim in long strokes, sparking the flint.]

The only real reason is that wearing black makes you look cool.

Here's a story that starts small. It'd be better if it starred a failed actress, used to be famous, Sunset-Boulevard-style, but no - she was just someone who checked her reflection every time she

passed a mirror. Maybe inventing the occasional excuse to walk into the bathroom again. Who doesn't? She started to collect mirrors. A poor excuse for a hobby, maybe, but it gave her relatives something to buy her at Christmas and better mirrors than ceramic kittens or unused cookbooks. When you hang enough mirrors in your home they begin to catch each others' reflections. Just the frames, at first, but soon she could see herself from new angles when she was banging other hooks into the walls. Odd shards of her body reflected round the room. Ricocheting. Time always adds up.

[The zippo, flicking open and snapping closed. Faintly, the sound of gas, then flame as it finally lights.]

Now you're thinking this is a Dorian Gray story, and that she's going to age terribly, or go mad, or the images in the mirrors will get older while she stays young, or maybe the reverse. They'd all be pretty good stories, but that's not what happened. Her house fell down. Collapsed. Her old terrace couldn't stand the weight of all that time. Everything that happened inside - meaningless minutia, just boiling water or applying lipstick or checking herself for new wrinkles - was multiplied a dozen times. And a dozen times a day. There was just too much history built up inside those walls.

At least she wasn't famous, so it was localised. If you're a celebrity, then just walking down the street is like that woman's world. Coincidence is everywhere. You see yourself drive by on the sides

of buses. You hear your own voice on the radio. Some nights, you can mix your own greatest-hits by walking between nightspots that are playing your songs so loudly they're trickling out on to the streets, and some nights -

[A sharp intake of breath. A small sound, like a steak cooking. Recording ends.]

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[Recording begins. Music is playing. The song is unknown.]

- all this talk about fame, of lasting for a thousand years, like in an epic by Homer. Fame is measured in distance, not time. We're all famous to our friends. And we're not living in 'Batman', are we? Melbourne was named after Melbourne far away in England, of course, which was named after a Lord Melbourne, who rocked. He hung out with Lord Byron and Percy Shelly and was all about drinking and drugs and sex scandals. Scandals. That's plural. I think he'd like it here.

But I keep thinking about people with diseases. When you're the first case, and the thing that kills you ends up named after you forever. Decades later, others will be cursing your name from their deathbeds. What did you ever do to them? It's not like you brewed up a new cancer, giggling, in your underground lair! It's not fair, but it's something. So long as they never find a cure.

Where's my statue? Where's my spiked crown and war against the weather? I'm ready to be set in stone. No - in glass. I want to be sculpted entirely in glass, filled with an invisible gas that lights up at night. Red like carpet, like blood. It'd be so fragile that the first squeal from the crowd would paint crackling spider webs all over me, and then I'd be gone...

[The music stops, replaced by applause and the blather of a small crowd. He claps, slowly, waiting for it to stop.]

Instead it's politicians who get to lay the first stones of important buildings, as if these foundation stones would be missing without their hard work, and the city would crumble. Never mind the construction workers or tax dollars or years spent studying architecture. These stones sit proud. They want us to believe that the fucking politician responsible went down into the mines and dug up a hunk of raw ore. Shaped it with bare hands. Hefted it up on one shoulder and carried it across Australia, stopping only to kiss babies along the way, and then slammed the stone down to the cheers of construction workers who'd been waiting to start building around it. And the politician, I don't know, maybe carves his name into the rock with lasers that shoot out his fucking eyes. Without these famous stones? Maybe Melbourne would be nothing.

You know that they took away the Punters Club. Now you can buy pizza there. Next time you're there, because you're hungry or nostalgic or both

at once, you can try this experiment. You'll need a stylus and a speaker. You can make your own with a pin and a cone of paper. Seriously, work it out yourself. This isn't a kids' science program. They didn't demolish the building, so go there and run your needle slowly across the wall. All those years of smoke and grime and the sweat that escaped from skin, collected on the roof, and then rained down again in thick, warm drops - it has formed into grooves on the walls, like delicate vinyl.

[The squeak of a wet fingertip slowly being drawn down glass, cutting through the next song.]

I'm not going to spoil the riff it'll play. It's just one two three four, you know? It's rock and roll. One riff is all that rock needs. Anything more is masturbation. Fans keep snapped guitar strings and scrawled playlists in glass cases, like they're afraid the music will escape into the air. This isn't music. It's trivia. It's floating crap left in the wake of art. Throw it away!

I think about what is squatting in the Melbourne museum. They have, I am told, this enormous fucking computer there. It weighs two tons. It's older than me. It was the first computer ever to generate music. This is ground zero of bubblegum pop. It used to make my skin crawl, but now - when the same recycled rock riff is making different bands famous, ten years apart - I have a special place in what's left of my heart for disposable pop music.

[The recording distorts. The bass in the music

drops out. His voice spits and crackles.]

You hear it one summer; you love it until it frays and falls apart; you never want to hear it again. I spend a lot of time tuning my radio to the space between catchy hit songs and listening to the spitting fuzz and static that lives there. I think I know what it is. It's a graveyard. It's where all the songs no one listens to go to die. The hiss is the sound of someone stuck to the stage by spotlights, standing too close to the microphone, opening their mouth and nothing coming out but air, listening to the band rolling eyes behind them. They can't remember a single note, let alone hit it. They're just breathing, in and out.

[The recording flutters between momentarily resolving, then falling apart, finding and losing syllables. What's left of his voice grows softer.]

The static helps me sleep. It's the only thing that does. It's not silence, silence that needs to be filled. It doesn't name names. After the microphones are switched off, this is what's left. I'm not religious. I know the dead are probably dead, and feel nothing at all, but if there's one thing left it'd be this sound. This hiss, tuning in and out, sawing against the air. Lungs expanding, deflating, taking up space, letting it go.

Smoking just lets us see it.



[Recording ends.]

Be Famous and Die
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This audiocassette was discovered by Martyn Pedler amongst over two dozen tapes bought at a Fitzroy garage sale. *Be Famous And Die* is handwritten on the label. The bulk of the music it contains seems to have been taped directly from FM radio. This interview cuts in at 17 minutes, 33 seconds, interrupting “Your Pretty Face Is Going To Hell” by Iggy and The Stooges (1973).