

Chapter Six

1975-79: BLOODY OLD RATBAG

In the middle of the darkness, a small light appeared, although at that time I had no idea what it would lead to. Sometime in the spring, a fellow my age came in to the shop to place a card in our advert window. Among the ads for rotting cars for sale ('Good runner, used daily, needs new tyres'), free kittens and offers of babysitting, he wished to insert the sale of his record collection. I read the card he handed me, which said something like:

**For Sale: 200+ 45 rpm records, 1963-66.
Many great oldies, original sleeves, some
EPs. Stones, Kinks, Who, Animals, Chuck
Berry, Otis Redding etc. Good condition
throughout. £40 o.n.o..**

On impulse I said: 'I'll buy them', and took delivery that afternoon. Through a network of locals that I knew, I sold less than half of them for more than twice my investment. I had become a record dealer!

It was a small beginning, but a good one. Dad took an interest in this, and we agreed that the business could fund any further purchases and running expenses until the experiment either took off or could be called a failure. It was to be a great source of therapy for him.

I began reading the Exchange & Mart 'Records For Sale' section, and had some good luck very early, buying two nice jazz LP collections for reasonable prices. Dad and I kept the few that we fancied, and I re-subscribed to Vintage Jazz Mart, typed up my lists, submitted them and awaited developments. By the time we had finished, there was a reasonably good-looking profit grinning at us. We also began placing 'Records Wanted' ads in Exchange & Mart, and expanded into buying 78's, including one or two splendid collections of pre-war British pressings. Then, one day I received an extraordinary phone call in response to one of our adverts:

'Mr. Vermin?'

'Er, Vernon, yes.'

'I hear you buy old records.'

'Yes.'

'Well, I've got lots of them.'

'What kind of records are they?'

'Old ones.'

'I understand, but what style of music are they?'

'Oh, VERY mixed, all sorts.'

'Look, tell you what, have you got the records there with you?'

'Yes, they're all here'

'Well, could you just grab a handful and read me what's on the labels?'

'Oh, I don't think any of them have labels, dear.'

'It's the bit in the middle that's printed.'

'Ooohh, all right. Good idea.'

I sat holding the phone imagining the Bings and the Franks and the Tommys and the Veras I was going to have to refuse.

'All right, dear, here we are. Now, this first one is Cook's Dreamland Orchestra and the label says it's Gennett.'

'Eh?' I looked down and realised the tea in my mug was shaking.

'Here's one on the Victor label by a feller called Benny Moten. Wasn't he a comedian?'

'Uh...' Okay, now the tea was slopping over the brim.

'This one's very pretty. Its label's called QRS.'

'Er, how many do you think you've got?' I said, trying to quell the castrato trembling in my voice.

'Ooohh... HUNDREDS, dear.'

'I see. Any idea what you want for them?'

'No dear, but you'll know when you see them won't you? I can have my lad deliver them to you tomorrow.'

And so he did. All 600 of them. It was an extraordinary collection of classic jazz, mostly early British and European pressings, but including a handsome sprinkling of American originals and early reissues.

Did I buy them? No, I didn't. What I did instead was to tell the old dear the truth that she had a fabulous collection worth some thousands of pounds, and that, rather than buy it, it would be a lot fairer if I sold them for her on commission. She laughed, thanked me for my honesty, called me a stupid twit into the bargain, and we hammered out a simple deal. She made her several grand and I made my commission. Taking commission deals became a key element in my fast-expanding sideline.

'How did she come by such an extraordinary collection in the first place?', I hear you plead. She was the owner of a stationery shop and had a

tenant in the flat above who was found dead in his bed one morning. The records were his, and he had no family. After the funeral, she cleared his rooms, with a view to chucking everything out, including the records. She almost did, until her son suggested they might be worth a few bob to someone. He was right. I still sometimes wonder who the victim of the Dead Man Blues was.

The shop remained our main source of income and, as Dad slowly improved, so some of my mother's fears and worries abated. Linda was still very ill though, so all of us, including Linda's mother, took turns looking after Matthew. We were coping.

None of this, however, discouraged the loonies from coming through the door. Why was it always the early afternoon that they presented themselves? What did loonies do in the morning? Prepare hat-transportable sandwiches for other loonies?

This one, though, was a little less benign than most. He looked normal; they often do. As he stepped through the door, I glanced at him, in the way that retailers glance at everyone who comes in, just to size them up. He was white, English, medium build, middle aged, middle class, dressed sensibly in casual middle-class middle-age English clothes accompanied by out-of-fashion specs and a hat that probably should have been shot a decade earlier. Perfectly normal.

I continued filling cigarette shelves and saw him go to the far wall where all the weekly magazines lay, and pick up the Baptist Times. No problem, he'll come over here in a minute for a small Cadbury's Fruit & Nut bar and a pocket pack of Kleenex. Then I saw him shake loose a copy of the Jewish Chronicle; okay, so he was buying for a neighbour. Then he snapped up the West Indian World, Gay News, West African, Private Eye, Catholic Herald, New Musical Express, the feminist Spare Rib, and the far-left Morning Star. He approached the counter and handed them to me with a thin smile. I gave him the price, which he extracted from his little leather horseshoe (I should have guessed that one). As he passed me the exact money he said confidently: 'Just keeping an eye on what their little minds are up to,' then turned and left.

We drifted into 1976 still trading in newsprint, tobacco, confectionery and jazz records. Then, one day I got a phone call from an old chum I hadn't seen for some years, Chris Reichardt. Chris had been in the blues collectors' circle since the late 1960's. His family had money, and so he had taken the opportunity to visit the US in 1969, returning with an extraordinary starter kit of downhome blues 45's, mostly culled from Randy's Record Shop in Gallatin, Tennessee and Stan's Record Shop in Shreveport, Louisiana. To this he added albums, 78's and more 45's throughout the next few years. Now he was getting married and wanted to sell. Was I interested? I offered him the commission deal and he accepted it. There were probably 600 records, all of them good, some of them amazing. But clearly, I had to do more than just put them through VJM. With the willing assistance of several other collectors, especially Ian Cole and Bill Greensmith, I scraped together a basic mailing list

of potential customers. As I was preparing the auction list, Ian, Bill, and a few others I had now reached asked me if I would put some of their unwanted records into the same list for the same terms. 'Sure, why not?'

In the late spring of 1976, I mailed out about 200 copies of a privately-printed list. The results were spectacular. Chris Reichardt got his money and so did everyone else. I clearly needed to do this again. I therefore approached everyone within striking distance who had bid and offered them the commission deal. It was enough to launch a second list, and from these and the several others that I ran in the following two years grew an odd nodule called Sailor's Delight. But we need to step back a little because in the meantime there was also a lot going on back at the ranch.

Linda and Dad were both steadily getting better, but my parents had had enough of the shop and London, and were starting to make retirement-to-the-coast noises. The record business was doing well, I felt that there was potential to expand it, and was willing and eager to try. The shop was in good saleable shape, so we decided to up sticks all over again. In January 1978 we disposed of the shop, my parents sold their house, and with the money from both, my folks moved to coastal Sussex and Linda and I put a deposit on a Victorian row house just round the corner, at Brockenhurst Gardens.

I was now trading under the name 'Sailor Vernon'. This was not my invention. Following the premature death of Mike Leadbitter in 1974, Blues Unlimited had been sold on by its surviving founder Simon Napier to a consortium that included Bill Greensmith, John Broven and Mike Rowe. Getting mellow on something one evening, probably Lucozade Slings, they began dreaming up soubriquets for their friends. For reasons none of them can now recall, mine was 'Sailor'. Without telling me, they impishly altered my standing advert in Blues Unlimited. The next issue read: 'Want good Blues record auction lists? Write to 'Sailor' Vernon. All the nice guys bid with Sailor!' People in Japan, Norway and Wigan, not knowing the difference, began addressing envelopes to 'Sailor Vernon' and I quickly realised that I had been handed a great trading name. My lists, which had increasingly become filled with all sorts of jokes and arcane rubbish as well as the records, started to go out under that name. The odd nodule would eventually morph from these lists. Look, it wasn't MY fault...

In early March 1978, armed with 1500 quids-worth of dollar travellers' cheques, a ticket for a rental car and a new credit card, I stepped outside of Britain for the first time in my life. I was going to see if I could acquire enough records to kick the business up a notch or two. If it failed, I'd have had an adventure and I'd get a day job. If it succeeded, I'd be on the path I had wanted to take since I had stood in that rare patch of Kilburn sunlight listening to Ralph Foxley's stories and advice. It was worth a shot.

I arrived in New York to be greeted and swept out of the airport by Dave Sax, who had emigrated with his wife Patsy six years earlier by accepting a job with Bell Telephone. He took me directly to Harry's Steak

House and I consumed my first vast American hamburger among the hubbub of a late Friday night crowd. I was here! The land I had dreamed of since, oh, I don't even know when, perhaps since I first saw the Lone Ranger or Laurel & Hardy. I'd been an Americanophile most of my life. Now, in this late-night hamburger joint on the road to Dave's Long Island home, I had my first genuine taste of America, in more ways than just the one. It was warm, comfortable, loud, fast, friendly, unceremonious and great tasting. I finished falling completely and forever in love with America there and then.

After a weekend with Dave and Patsy, catching up on old news and listening to records, I took to the road in the huge, electric-everything Chevrolet bestowed upon me by Dollar Car Rentals. For someone whose then-current vehicle was a biscuit-tin sized Mini Traveller, it was amazing. I played with the NASA-like control panels, watching windows and seats and rear view mirrors jump to my command. I turned on the ignition and listened to the quiet but powerful roar of its V8 engine. I stepped out to admire its sleek design. It looked like a silver bullet (Maybe the Lone Ranger's silver bullet? Tonto would know.) I wanted one. 'Get me the Loan Arranger - and Pronto!'

On the Monday morning I took to the road. An Englishman on the New Jersey turnpike for the first time. Was I mad? Was this real? Or a dream I would awaken from to find myself consoled with a pot of tea and an afternoon rain? It was real. I turned on the radio, watched the aerial climb up through the wing and heard Dolly Parton's 'Jolene'.

My first stop was Philadelphia, where I was to take up the kind offer of a place to stay made by Russ Shor, with whom I'd been communicating for a year or more. He lived on South 48th Street, and I came over the Walt Whitman Bridge, landed on North Broad Street and pulled into a gas station to ask directions. I expected a vastly complex set of instructions that included references to landmarks I had no idea existed. I would, being a bloke, simply listen to all this, nod like I understood perfectly and set off. Nobody would ever see me again. Years later, a rusty car containing a grinning, tea-stained skeleton would be discovered somewhere deep in the Amish countryside... but the guy simply said, in a broad Philly accent that I would come to recognise: 'Okay, thisiswhachadoo: this is North Broad, runs all the way to City Hall. Go round City Hall, it becomes South Broad. You want South 48th, right? Count 48 blocks after y'get past City Hall and hang a right. That's it.' And it was. Try getting from Neasden to Tooting with instructions that bald.

Russ's house was a grand old Victorian nestling serenely in the leafy street of a real neighbourhood. He welcomed me in, fed me, played me extraordinary records from his fabulous 78 collection, gave me a bed and saw me off the next day on my way South. I turned onto Interstate 95 at 8:00 am filled with excitement, wonder and Jimmy Dean breakfast sausage. I was, to borrow one of Bruce Bastin's phrases, 'bug-eyed and headed South'. My plan was simple: I would pop down Interstate 95 to Florida, where my aunt had

offered me a place to stay, and from which strategic location I had promised my mother I would report by phone; it meant a lot to her that I would see and be with her favourite sister. Then, I would head back up and inland through the mid-South, stopping off at places I had been told would have old records for sale. Whatever else I picked up on the way was gravy. Then, back in New York, I would cut deals with collectors who knew I was returning. There was no Plan B. It was that loose.

I was out there alone. I had a month, a car, money, changes of clothes, maps, some addresses, 40 packs of the British menthol cigarettes I was hooked on, and a need to succeed. I floored it, exceeding the speed limit whenever I felt safe to do so because I wanted to have that experience I had seen so often in the movies. At one point, when I crossed the state line into North Carolina, I actually had sufficient romantic gaucheness to shout 'YEEHHAAA!' No-one was listening except the seven year old inside me.

Before long, I began to grasp the sheer size of America. It took me two days to cross the Carolinas, stopping only for gas, food and lodging. I was high on the mixture of fresh experience and the odd ersatz déjà-vu of having seen visions of all this before, in movies and on TV. Broderick Crawford was still out there somewhere, saying 'Ten-Four'. Bonnie and Clyde were only a mile or two ahead, hiding out from the law behind a thicket. Steve McQueen would come hammering past me any minute in a Thunderbird chasing two geezers waving a shotgun back at him. Laurel & Hardy would flag me down from the roadside to point out that their Model T had been sawn in half by a bizarre accident. And any minute now Big Joe Williams' hitching thumb would bring me to a halt. I popped another wine gum from the stash I had snuck through customs and flipped on the radio. 'Jolene'. Dolly Parton was clearly intent on accompanying me into the South.

It took me four days to reach Sarasota from Philadelphia, including a few stops along the way to gawp bovinely at this, that or the udder. My aunt greeted me like the long-lost relative I was and celebrated my arrival with a barbecue on the back lawn, including in it every last extension of her family: her three sons, two daughters, their wives, husbands, boyfriends and neighbours.

I stayed a week, including an overnighter to Miami to check out one of those leads I had. I came back with several hundred original Vee-Jay 45's and the experience of having driven Alligator Alley, the two-lane, shoulderless, gas-station-free highway that cuts through the Okefenokee swamplands to Miami. I was told that it got its name from the alligators that lay in wait just feet from the roadside, ready to make lunch out of any pasty-legged fool like me who might want to get out and have a stretch. Oh, and the mosquitoes... don't drive with the windows down, you'll get eaten alive. At the midway point, as I checked my gas tank level for the umpteenth time, I realised very fully that this was not the A41, and that there was no turning back.

After a final celebratory party in Sarasota, I departed to head up into

the lower and mid-South. I would turn left at Tallahassee and head for New Orleans. In Mobile I got lucky and found a juke box distributor in the phone book who responded to my call with a 'Come on down and buy', so I spent a jolly afternoon leafing through browser bins, turning up a healthy mix of blues, R&B, old rock and country. He charged me 50 cents a pop for the several hundred 45's I found, but pulled the Hank Williams and the Bo Diddleys back out with an apology: 'Cain't sell 'em to ya, waytoo valerbel.' I didn't argue. I had just found, among other things, an effluentpile of silvertop Chesses.

I arrived in New Orleans on Good Friday evening, barrelling in off Highway 10 West. As I crossed the bridge that led to the twinkling lights of the city, I kick-started the radio to find that Dolly had been replaced by the remarkably welcome Fats Domino singing 'Walking To New Orleans'. What a wonderfully appropriate entrance! If life is all about detail, this serenaded twilight entry was a small jewel to always treasure.

I spent Easter in town, just gawking as much as anything; I played tourist on Bourbon and Canal Streets, avoiding a plethora of Japanese camerakazi pilots, and enjoyed an evening with Terry Patterson, a local collector who seemed to have every worthwhile New Orleans 45 on an original pressing, and who introduced me to Billy Tate's 'Single Life Blues', which is still somewhere in my all-time Top Twenty. I left without having bought much, but I sure had a nice weekend. However, it was time to get serious and go to Athens, Georgia, where Bruce Bastin had said I could get some real nice stuff that he had left behind. Following the speed of the CB-linked trucks, I floored it out of Louisiana accompanied by a hellfire radio preacher.

Bruce was right. In the upper floor of a side street record store in this neat college town, I found just what I was looking for. 'Any friend of Mr. Bastin is welcome here,' said the owner, unlocking the stockroom door to my future. Bruce had taken just about all the downhome stuff, but there was a ton of steaming R&B and I took all I could cram into the car: trunk, back seat, floor, front seat, under the seat and back parcel shelf. I threw out everything I didn't need including spare shoes and dirty laundry to make more room and began the long slow trundle back up to New York. I was about a day later than I wanted to be and I had a scheduled plane to catch and still a lot to do in Philadelphia and New York.

I left Athens at five in the evening and drove fourteen hours straight, arriving bleary but stoked in Philadelphia at seven the next morning. It was too early to go to Russ's and I needed sleep, so I checked into the Starlight Motel, and fell into a short coma. When I woke, I strolled into the lobby looking for lunch, was directed through a door by a clerk whose surprise I failed to understand until I opened the door. It was as if I had walked through a western movie's swing doors to find that I was the cause of the piano ceasing to play. All eyes turned on me. This was clearly a VERY BLACK neighbourhood. Would I be welcome?