

WE

Live

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VAN

The road. Every great epic tale is usually based on it. The road is life, life is the road. That's where the idea for this zine stemmed from. In October 2009 my band, Sister Kisser, was getting ready to leave for a three week tour that would take us down the east coast and through the midwest. At the time I figured I would try and document it through a blog. However, rather than writing short updates from the road, I ended up writing essay length accounts of our adventures. Everyday was something new, a different tale that was all part of the same growing story.

The blog didn't work out. My writing couldn't keep up with the pace of travel and being actively engaged in the moment. It was probably for the better. I've let those days settle in and really become a part of me. I can still see and recant the minute details of certain moments.

At least I think I can. Maybe my memory has fabricated certain things, as any memory will. These are stories from my perspective. I'm sure that for anyone else involved their account of a particular night will be slightly altered.

And that's okay. I'm not claiming that this is some objective account. This is just my telling of the story.

The stories included in these pages took place during one of two tours: late October - early November 2009 and May 2010. In essence it's all one ongoing tour that will continue and flow together. Maybe you'll enjoy these accounts, maybe you won't. You'll probably find some mistakes here and there, some minor layout flaws, etc. Whatever.

Thanks for picking up a copy and thank you to my brothers in Sisterkisser and everyone else that rode with us, fed us, hung out with us, and got to know us. You made these moments happen.

-Chrisarena

I. The Itch

I have this vivid memory from my early childhood. I must be about a year old, maybe even younger. I can remember my mother carrying me to the car and putting me in the child seat. The sun was bright in the sky but the temperature was cool, my small windbreaker protecting me from the elements. Sitting in the back, I remember looking at Mom as she started the car and put the old Chevette in reverse, slowly backing out of the driveway before heading north on Wright Ave. The neighborhood is different now; back then there were more trees, more life in the community. Turning left on Old Country Road, my young mind loved the sight of the playground at Pine Acres Park, especially the domed jungle gym. Before knowing what ambitions or goals were, my toddler-self desired to climb to the top of that seemingly giant gym. Those thoughts quickly left me as I was reminded we were going to my grandparents' apartment

We lived in Deer Park. My grandparents lived in Great Neck. A drive of about a half hour. Heading north on Deer Park Ave before ultimately going west on the LIE, my eyes soaked up the sights around me. Trees, houses, farms, cars, horses; it all dazzled me and made me feel the breadth of the world a little bit more. As minor a memory as it may seem, it stuck with me and I'm reminded of it every time I travel somewhere. I breathe in my surroundings, become entranced by roads and sights. I think that's why the van has felt so much like home.

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The road is life. We all travel it, but all make our own pace; stop at different destinations, create our own journey. With every turn of the wheel, with every mile crossed, we close in on something. Maybe we know what, but more than likely we don't. It's best if we don't. I realized that once in Ohio.

We were on our way to Cleveland, traveling through the warmth of an early November sun. After stopping at a rest stop, we cleaned ourselves up and filled our heads with smoke. As we pulled back onto the highway, Dustin began pulling a string of dollar bills out of his mouth. Taking the strand, I wrapped it around me, wearing the god that rules us around my neck. Fields of corn and wheat rolled by with the sun streaming in all around us. We were all perfect in that moment. Matt driving, Dustin going wild in the passenger seat, Sal deep into a book, Slice enjoying the moment, Kaitlyn living, and me absorbing it all in. I felt like that toddler again, sitting in the child safety seat, looking out the window with new eyes, wanting to see and feel more; getting those first feelings to get up and leave and experience the world, like an itch that stayed with me everywhere I've been.

There's always more to see, more to feel, more to be. It's an itch that has never fully been scratched. I'm not sure if it ever will be. I do know that I want that feeling always, it's part of the journey.

II. First Night

The first night. Have to set a tone. Take the first step. We left around 2:30, did some food shopping and hit the road. Something about leaving behind everything and driving off into something has a romantic spirit to it. Go west or something dumb like that.

We hit some traffic. It rained a lot. We got soaked. Our windshield wipers broke. We worried about leaking anti-freeze. No real concern. We knew we would be fine as long as we were able to play.

The show was supposed to be in a basement in Baltimore. When we got there we found the folks putting it on to be genuinely nice and inviting. We cooked a meal in the small kitchen and got settled into our surroundings. After awhile it seemed that the show was going to be moved to a different location. We finished our meal and followed our new friends to the spot. Going up hills and along windin roads we quickly left the city and found ourselves in a suburban corporate park.

The show would be in an abandoned office space. We were told that no one had ever been bothered here and that good times were meant to be had. Playing in a non-typical spot brought a whole new spirit to the set. Something about playing somewhere you shouldn't boosted our spirits a bit, while still not knowing exactly what to expect.

By the time we kicked off the set a nice crowd had gathered. As a band I don't think we had ever experienced the reception we received from a group of strangers. Kids went off. Jumping around, bumping into us, throwing beer; releasing themselves and joining us in some fun. It was exciting and humbling all in the same moment.

From there the night became more and more intense. We packed up our equipment and settled down, enjoying our evening substances. We hung around with the kids who booked the show. We were our awkward selves, enjoying the company of other awkward selves. The party around us clearly had two separate groups. One group intently played beer pong. It meant a whole lot to them. Their convictions about the game were so strong they decided to fight about it. Fighting like I'd never seen in person. These dudes must have watched a lot of UFC.

It was pretty violent. Every time a fight would start up and then die down, another would begin. Close to six, maybe more fights occurred. It was a lot to take in. We were the spectators watching from afar as drunken dudes tore their shirts off, yelled at each other, and bashed themselves senselessly.

All for beer pong. Such dedication.

We waited around for things to simmer down before making our way back inside with our sleeping bags. Finding a spot in the corner to spend the night, we fell into our drunken sleep as the party continued in other rooms.

Waking in the morning with mountains of beer cans around us, we nursed our hangovers, had some oatmeal, and started the drive to the next city. We learned a few days later that a little while after we left the cops came and arrested a few kids that were cleaning up. After only one night we had already narrowly missed canceling the rest of tour.

III. Legit Bizness

When a van is your home you learn to get yourself situated in places you wouldn't normally. Yes, I am brushing my teeth in a parking lot. Excuse me for getting changed in the van. You learn to deal with dirty looks and shrug them off. These situations are an everyday occurrence. The ones who judge aren't willing to look beyond the life they surround themselves with; it's not something that fits into their world view.

We arrived in Greensboro way too early and went straight to the venue. Load in wasn't until 7:30 and it was noon. We pulled into the abandoned gas station next door and began to make some lunch. Parking lot meals, the life of the road. After eating we assessed Big Ern, checking the radiator and the wipers. Since we had plenty of time to kill we decided to try and find a mechanic or autoparts store. Having working wipers again seemed kind of important. We drove around for a bit, finding two mechanics; one wanted to charge a ridiculous amount and the other suggested we go to a store to get the small clip we would need. It seemed like it could be an easy fix. However, the attendants in the store offered little help. They looked at us as if we had no idea what we were talking about and offered us windshield wiper fluid, as if it could help. So, Operation: Fix Ern's Wipers was not a success.

To celebrate our unsuccessful attempt we entered a store of the adult persuasion. Nothing like relieving the tension of broken windshield wipers than browsing a sex shop. After learning about certain tools used to stretch the urethra, we said our goodbyes to the clerk and cleared out. With nothing else to do, we returned to the venue. This time we found some folks to hang with.

The group running the venue had showed up and were starting to get things together for the evening festivities. After a quick tour of the building, in which we all got a good vibe, we decided this would be a good night. We made a friend by the name of Kris who took us to get beer and chatted us up about Greensboro and how him and his cohorts were putting a lot of work into making this venue a great spot. We hung around the venue for awhile drinking beers, talking equipment, and playing with a great dog by the name of Nala. A pit bull, black lab mix. After sometime a fellow named Ben showed up, bringing with him some top notch food for us. Burritos! He set before us a great spread: a pot of spiced rice and tofu, tortillas, vegan sour cream, and fresh avocado. We filled our bellies, laid back, and enjoyed what had already been a great day.

At this point, what had been a rain-less day turned into downpours to make Noah proud. Luckily we didn't have to drive; unfortunately we had to unload our equipment. While unloading we met the other bands playing and bullshitted with them about tour life.

The show ended up being a diverse mix of punk, hardcore, and metal. Every band was totally different, unique, and in some ways out of their element; but really we were all in our element. Something about the venue filled the air with positive energy.

After the show we all milled around a bit, waiting for the venue to clear out and clean up before heading to a hole-in-the-wall southern diner. Cheap, delicious food is always good after a show.

With our stomachs full for the third time that day, we left the diner and followed our new friend Kris back to his place. There we played with his cats and dogs before falling asleep to Dead Alive on VHS.

IV. Drive, Sleep, Drive

Driving through the night is not existing. The world is a dark mass whizzing by on the highway. The only sights to be seen are the headlights of fellow travelers and the fluorescent glow of truck stops and strip malls. The only reality is the one within the confines of the van; the outside world is too dark to see.

We decided to do the drive in shifts. When you weren't driving or sitting in the passenger seat you were passing off some form of sleep. Drivers drank coffee and slapped themselves in the face to stay awake; those in the passenger seat controlled the playlist and kept the driver occupied.

I started the drive from Columbia with Damien as my co-pilot. With my mug of steaming coffee at my side and Potboiler coming through the stereo, I sped up dark hills heading east; back to the coast. We eventually hit I-95 and from there headed south, crossing the Georgia border and catching a glimpse of Savannah. Nothing else of note happened. A bit further into Georgia we rotated with Matt and Sal taking over. Damien and I crawled into the back laying on top of each other, and descended into a dream world of highways and tractor trailers. I awoke a few hours later to discover we had just passed through Jacksonville. Florida! We had arrived. The temperature was rising and the early morning sun was just starting to peak it's head out. By the time we reached Orlando the humidity had kicked into full effect and we all started a sweat that wouldn't stop for the next few days. Matt started to fall asleep behind the wheel, I could see the reflection of his eyes in the rear view mirror. He jumped in his seat when I yelled. It was time to pull over.

We got off the highway on a foggy road in the swamps outside Orlando. A gas station wasn't too far. We got some coffee and walked around back to look at the swamp and check for gators. And what do you know? We saw a gator poking it's head out of the murky water, sitting still, waiting for something. Maybe it was waiting for us. I continued the drive to Tampa, hitting some morning traffic as the city rose in front of us. The morning fog was long and the heat was hitting all of us. We were delirious, tired, and hungry. After not existing for nine hours, entering back into the world was having dramatic effects.

The plan was this: we were going to meet our buddy, Chuck at his friend's apartment. Chuck had given us the address the night before, so the GPS was taking us straight there. We eventually found ourselves in a large condo development. We thought we were at the right apartment and even knocked on the door, but we were wrong. Turns out there were two sides to this development and we were on the Wrong side. Damn.

Once we had righted ourselves and embraced our friends, we got down to business. First, food. We cooked a meal of rice and beans, the standard tour meal. It brought us back to our senses. Those senses were soon lost once the bong was brought out. Whoops! No matter. We laid on the carpet, feeling the air conditioning brush our skin as we debated what our next move should be. There was a house show starting at noon. There was a chance we could play. We just had to go and talk to the right people.

We knew it was the house as soon as we saw the large crowd outside. "Alright, we can do this," we told ourselves. "All we have to do is walk up there, find out whose house it is and ask if we can play." A fairly easy task for most moderately adjusted people. However, it's much more difficult when you're socially awkward and delirious from lack of sleep and taking one too many bong hits on a hot day.

So we didn't play. Maybe we could have, but we never asked. Oh well. We got some beer and melded into the chaos happening around us. The house was a typical punk house, not exactly clean, but not too dirty. We descended the stairs to the mold-smelling, beer soaked, jam-packed-with-sweat basement. A bunch of bands played. I remember seeing Shang-a-Lang, God Damn Doo Wop Band, and some others. I could even be wrong about who I just listed. The mid-afternoon heat had reached into all of our brains and tickled us just a bit. We weren't operating at full capacity.

By the time things started to wear down at the house, I was getting in the van with a mohawk. Damien had talked me into it, quietly nudging me on and whispering in my ear, just as a girl emerged from the back porch with some clippers. Worse things can happen when you're drunk, especially when you have Damien Barthelson giving you suggestions.

We had our fill of that house, if we stayed any longer we would have lost too much of our minds to continue. So, we headed to the parking lot of the skate park. Another show was about to start there. We decided we should probably eat, so Sal and Dustin started work on getting a meal together. Damien and Matt looked for gators in the sewer, I laid down in the middle of the parking lot with a huge smile on my face.

The rest of the night is a blur of seeing bands and faces. Running around and jumping in drunken hysterics was the theme of the night, before I snapped out of it sometime around 10:00. I was sober. I had the good sense to stop drinking hours ago and had sweat all the alcohol out. The other four were starting to crash, one after the other, as they piled into the van, passing out on top of each other. Dustin and I watched Off With Their Heads set and then we left. It was just after midnight. We decided we would make the drive to Gainesville tonight. I drove the whole way while the others slept. To stay awake I stopped for coffee three times and blasted Blink 182, singing along at the top of my lungs. Feeling thirteen again was the only way to stay awake.

Gainesville was dead by the time we rolled in at 3:00 a.m. Luckily, our buds in Iron Chic were still awake. We headed over to their hotel room, where we proceeded to drink more beer and play cee-lo before passing out for good.

V. Goodbye

We didn't want to say goodbye, but we all knew we had to. It hung in the air all day, filling the whole van. Despite this, it felt good to be leaving Gainesville and moving on. The insanity of the past three days had taken its toll on us and we were ready to be cured by the road again. Getting gas and possibly the worst cup of coffee ever, we were soon on 75 heading north to Tallahassee.

The van was quieter than it normally was. The electricity that had flowed through it for the past week was low. Every so often it would peak for a moment and we'd be back to ourselves, playing off each other and feeling like a singular unit rather than five individuals, but it would quickly lose its grip as we realized that Damien was leaving us. It was a short drive, prolonged by a few stops at gas stations and roadside attractions. Just outside of the Tallahassee city limits we saw an alligator, dead, on the side of the road. Swamp road kill. Only in Florida.

Damien was flying back to New York. He had to get back to his responsibilities. We had to continue on. It pained all of us. Though his flight wasn't for a few hours, we all decided it was best to drop him at the airport now. We all needed time to cope with our loss. It was a short goodbye, quick and to the point. Pulling up to the drop off zone, it was as if Damien was out of the van before we had come to a complete stop. He collected his bundle of belongings, stood outside, and looked at us with longing in his eyes, as if to say, "I want to keep going." We wanted him to stay.

We all stared at Damien for a moment, cracking some jokes, but generally not knowing what to say. We'd see Damien in a week and a half, but it was still tough to say goodbye. It was almost like losing a kidney. Sure, we can survive with only one but something just isn't the same. That's what losing Damien was like. Matt finally took the initiative, proclaimed it time to go, and pulled away as Damien walked into the terminal.

Goodbye, friend.

With a few hours to kill, we found a small strip close to the house we were playing at and set up camp. We browsed a record store for awhile, I did some laundry, Matt took a nap. When we were good and ready we headed to the house, Coolifornia.

We felt right at home and were treated with some great hospitality right away. It was a small, bungalow-type house that was fairly clean with crates of records scattered around the living room. Murals depicting the death of the American dream covered the walls. We made ourselves some food and got to know our hosts, who were some fine people.

We were the first to show up, so as more folks arrived came more introductions and more names to forget. Luckily there were some familiar faces. Our friend Joe, from Long Island, decided to come to the show. Making his way to California, Joe was road-tripping for a few weeks, stopping in some cities and enjoying the scenery. It was good to have him around. Also in the mix were Cheap Girls and Failure's Union, two great bands we had played with a week earlier. With a good crowd and positive vibes, the show was great. Everyone was in high spirits and we all continued to party till the late hours of the night.

A fire was started in the backyard and eventually many of us made our way out there, taking swigs of our drinks and telling stories. When the fire died down, we did too. Those of us staying at the house dragged our feet back inside and passed out on the floor, snoring to the sounds of the Florida night.

VI. Matt

We met Matt at Clyde's. Cut-off Iron Maiden shirt, scraped arms and face, long ponytail. He said his nickname was "Kickapoo," the name of a Native American tribe he had heritage with.

Life had been rough for him. In and out of his home, put in a mental institution at sixteen. You could feel the pain in him. But that night was different. He said he hadn't felt this happy in a long time. All because we played in middle of nowhere Oregon.

Ontario, Oregon. One of those towns that time forgot, that you wonder why they even exist. One of those towns where there isn't much but the typical to do on a Friday night. One of those towns that touring bands never stop in.

For whatever reason, we stopped there that night, playing in a garage to a dozen kids fresh from the end of school; awaiting another summer. But this isn't about those other kids. This is about Matt. We personally affected him that night. He told us how he was angry all the time, not believing that there was a way out of the struggles life had handed him. Our music had reached into him through the ears and spread throughout his body, healing as much as it could. He had hope. He had optimism. He said he felt the urge to try and make something of his life; something he never previously felt.

Music saved him, just like it saved me. Just like it still saves me. I'm not a religious guy, by any means, but I believe in the healing power of sound. I'm glad to return the favor to others.

I don't know if Matt followed through on his sentiments. I like to think he did. Maybe he started a band of his own. Maybe he's making plans to get out of that town and find some new place where he can thrive and grow. I hope he still has that happiness and optimism in him that I saw that night, even if it's just a flicker. That's all anyone needs to get started on something.

VII. Clint Eastwood Syndrome

It's hard to say who's crazy and who ain't these days, especially when you see folks on the road everyday. You have to be just a little bit off in the brain to travel around these paved circuits. Total strangers talk to you at gas stations and fast food joints, offering you advice on your travels; usually advice that ends up being useless. Maybe those folks aren't crazy as much as they are lonely, finding ways to relate to other passersby.

The real loons are the ones you observe on the road, in their natural environment. The ones who talk to themselves, read the newspaper while driving, have their whole back window covered with trolls. Those sorts. You don't need to travel far to see them, hell you probably only have to walk down the block. Here in America our cars are an extension of our personality.

We trick out our cars, put rims on them, slap a bumper sticker or 12 on them, make them feel like home. When I saw that Lincoln Town Car on the highway in Indianapolis I didn't think much of it at first. It looked meticulous, like the owner really cared about the machine. The driver was pretty non-descript; white male, late 50s-early 60s, clean cut, aviator glasses on, giving off a Clint Eastwood vibe. Then the crazy came out. It seemed Mr. Driver didn't like the other travelers on the interstate. Maybe he was frustrated and was finding a way to vent, or maybe he legitimately had such disdain for humanity, but our subject was stretching his fingers into the shape of a gun and pointing them at any car in his path.

At first it seemed harmless, here was just a dude in traffic having a little fun. However, as we drove next to him for a few miles and saw the "shootings" continue, it didn't seem like a game of fun anymore. He stretched out his thumb with his pointer and middle fingers, took aim at whoever he wanted, and then quickly cocked his hand back like the action of a gun. You could tell he was going for accuracy in his imagination. The look of satisfaction on his face after every "kill" was so sinister it was almost chilling. More than likely there was nothing to be alarmed by. This guy could have been a wacko or just another norm showing his freak side in the privacy of his automobile.

The fact is, we're all the crazy ones. We all do things that when viewed out of context are judged as crazy or off. Our sanity is always tottering on the edge, swaying whichever way the winds of our mind decide to blow.

VII. Hills, Hills, Hills

Rolling hills, blasting wind, golden grass speckled with broccoli-like trees. Roller coaster highway. New sights for my eyes to view, air my lungs have never breathed, a place my soul has never been.

I've seen more on this journey than either of my parents and probably their parents as well. I've seen and experienced America in a way few do. I've absorbed it all and become apart of it. I am Whitman. I am Steinback. I am Kerouac. I am America.

Whatever that means.

Go westward. Those thoughts have always resonated with me. I needed to get out and see this place that I was taught about. I needed to teach myself about it. Form my own lessons, let the people I meet be the teachers. I am a student of these highways, these concrete relics of cold war policies. At least something good came from them. Are they good? I'm not sure.

Since getting home from tour I find I always return to it in conversation. It doesn't matter the topic, somehow my mind can find a way to relate it to some experience from the road. The back alleys of my mind have been paved and are burning for some traffic. They're waiting, all fresh and smooth, for new journeys, new experiences.

Certain moments from the road linger in my mind, usually the most miniscule. The curve of the road, the smell from the trees, the look on the face of the driver next to us. These are the things that make up the stories in my mind. The things that I find most worthwhile. When else will this moment happen? Never. This is the only time that things will be the way they are. That's why I breathe it all in. Slowly and surely, swiveling my head to take in the view.

IX. The Last Night

The last night is always tough. You're either stoked to be going home or totally bummed out at the thought. You want to feel invincible and keep going; you can go forever. At the same time, the thought of your bed, friends, and luxuries can faintly be heard in the air, calling you home.

It's hard.

Sometimes you want to party, other times you just want to get everything done with and start the drive home. I've felt both of these extremes, melting my brain from partying while sobbing in the corner at the thought of going home; or maybe sobbing because I'm leaving my home. It's hard to tell. More than likely my tears came from the immense back pain I was in after drunken antics on Hartford street corners.

It was the last night and we were only a few hours from home. We smelled, were cold from the chill of early November in the Northeast, and felt rattled from having hit a bear on the Mass Pike. At least Sal claims it was a bear; he was the only one to see it. It ran straight into the side. The damage was minimal, with only a long streak of blood staining the side of the van. We were lucky.

Arriving at the Whitney House, we embraced our friends and were welcomed with a large pot of vegan chili to warm our insides. It was going to be a good night.

We got beer, got up to date with our friends, and hung out with Nothington, who were also playing. It was a relaxing yet anxious night. We could have gone home after the show, making the two and a half hour drive that night, but we just didn't have it in us. We weren't ready yet. Instead we went to the bar with Nothington and the Whitney House crew.

After drinking our fill we headed back to the house, roaming the leave-covered streets of Hartford. It was one of those picturesque moments; the moon shining right on a huge pile of leaves, asking to be jumped in. So I did, and then Slice followed, right on top of me, his elbow jabbing into the back of my neck. For a moment I couldn't move, feeling the pain moving from my neck down my spine. Everyone was silent, not knowing how hurt I actually was. With a groan I used my drunk strength to push myself up and prove that I was fine, though still in pain. Back at the house I decided that sleeping in a recliner was a good idea; I have no idea what I was thinking. In the morning I pushed my hungover, stiff back into the van and we started the drive home.

Only on tour. Till next time.

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