

The Ballad of Tokyo Road

Dayne De Varko wanted the electric guitar.

It was no secret that the skull and serpent designed instrument was the aspiring rock star's object of his desire. Mounted on a display for all passers-by to see, the masterpiece that shone of metallic green with a tinge of red and orange, cast wonder and amazement beyond its glass enclosure for the world to appreciate.

De Varko could not hide his feelings. The guitar was all Dayne could talk about, for his obsession with the instrument was known to every friend and wannabe metal god around Denne. Added to this were the dozens of people who would have seen the young man staring through the front window of 'The Electric Axe' music store in the city almost every day. The shop attendants often noticed him too, but not once had offered to let him see the instrument up close. The mystery man's pensive stare, rugged dark mane and black coat that dropped down to his ankles were most likely the reasons why.

It dawned on De Varko that stalking the guitar for days on end as well as his loose chatter around town might be a problem. These factors suddenly entered into his calculations moments after he smashed the store window and took off with the prized bounty. But this drastic action in the middle of the night was not taken in the spur of the moment, for these seeds were sown a couple of months back.

'Slippery When Wet' was like nothing Dayne and his friends had experienced before. There were heavier artists around that they took inspiration from such as Ozzy Osbourne and Ronny James Dio, but there was something different about Jon Bon Jovi.

One afternoon having played the cassette through for the umpteenth time, Dayne and his friends; Jason Whimmer, Michael Cook and Mark Trotter, decided they would break the shackles of life on the dole and become superstars. But it wasn't just the instruments they needed to learn how to play, nor the killer albums they had to write and record, for the most important thing of all was to get the Bon Jovi look just right – and here was where their journey would begin.

Any magazine with their idol's face on the cover would be deftly shoplifted from the shelves of newsagencies. Posters and photos of the famous band - with more of a focus on the lead singer - were cut out of the periodicals and placed around the bedroom walls of those planning on becoming Denne's greatest export.

Every day in the privacy of their own rooms the lads would tease and style their hair, as well as practise their pouting and posing. Interviews with Bon Jovi would be read over and over, with quotes memorised and spoken aloud repeatedly until they could be delivered with perfection. Pearls of wisdom from the rock god included lines such as *"I'm growing my hair to death, coz I don't wanna be too cool for school"*, and the nonsensical *"Men want Pat Benatar. Men need Pat Benatar"*. But all the posters and articles acquired by the lads were still not enough, for to be able to truly emulate their heroes on stage, they needed a lot more.

Enter Michael Cook and his parents' VCR player. In what was a stroke of good fortune, Cook set the timer to record 'Rage' for three hours straight and had struck gold. Somewhere between two and three o'clock in the morning, every Bon Jovi music video ever made was played back-to-back, and Michael had recorded it all.

The tape was watched over and over, and multiple times a day throughout the first week. Every mannerism of Jon Bon Jovi was studied and then rehearsed, from his arse wiggling dance in *'Runaway'* to his acting skills in the *'Only Lonely'* video.

Within a few weeks, there was hardly any facet of the teenagers' lives that Jon Bon Jovi did not influence in some way – for the quartet now appeared, moved and even spoke like their hero - but without the American accent. It was time to take the next step.

The idea they came up with was to choose an instrument according to how similar they looked to the individual members of Bon Jovi. But this was De Varko's show, and although he was a dead ringer for Alec John Such, the bassist – there was no way he was going to be anyone but Jon.

Michael Cook was chosen to be the drummer, with his brilliance in providing the video cassette seemingly not enough to earn him a place at the front of the stage. Mark Trotter with his long light brown curls - permed or not he would never admit - would be the keyboardist. Jason Whimmer, who had similar long black hair to Dayne, would take on the lead guitarist/Richie Sambora role.

It started off with Dayne performing vocals while his mates mimicked the instrument noises with their mouths. A few days later, Cook brought in a pair of chopsticks he kept from dinner at the local Chinese restaurant, and would use these tools to tap on a table or desk to keep a beat. Trotter got in on the act next by 'borrowing' a pink Barbie keyboard from his little sister, and this would serve nicely until they could buy a proper synthesiser. Whimmer picked up a five-dollar acoustic guitar from St Vincent de Paul and would strum along as the band tried to create a brand-new sound together. It was mostly trial and error over the first few weeks, but during this time everyone's playing would improve out of sight.

Soon the teenagers began composing their own music: - ballads about local girls and songs a little rebellious in nature, featuring topics such as setting fire to the school or blowing up town hall. It was De Varko who decided that his own composition - a rock anthem titled 'Let's Go Rocking Tonight' - would be the band's signature tune.

There were no arguments from the lads when Dayne first performed it for them *a cappella*, for they were all sold. It was as though it came from the pen of Jon Bon Jovi himself.

"Let's go rocking tonight.

For freedom we have to fight.

Anybody can go.

Everyone that we know.

So come on baby, don't be uptight.

Let's go rocking tonight."

The boys from Denne were ready to shock the world, and all that was needed now were the right instruments. This was where 'The Electric Axe' - a specialist music store in the city - came into play.

However, all the prices were too high, with each guitar costing almost five hundred dollars each. The would-be rockers realised that on unemployment benefits they could never afford these items – and this was the genesis for the crime that was to take place.

One o'clock in the morning was the time agreed upon. The lads also thought it best to approach the city from an alternate route, avoiding the well-lit roundabout near the old and dated 'All Seasons Hotel'. As for the mission itself, it was to be a quick smash and grab job,

with the brick needed to break through the glass already in their possession - and that was pretty much how it panned out.

Dayne was first through the enormous hole the brick had created, with the glass coming apart in massive sheets which left a door-sized entrance. The thieves had expected the glass to shatter Hollywood-style and were a little surprised when it did not, but they quickly put that disappointment aside and got right down to business.

Although the shop was shrouded in darkness, Dayne knew exactly where his guitar would be. He was in and out in a flash and already running back to the getaway car before his mates had chosen what to take. All in all, it was a slick operation and the car was moving again within two minutes, with the added bonus of no alarms being set off.

A small sense of panic did set in as De Varko's station wagon flew across the bridge. Breaking into a shop in the middle of the night was a new experience for the band members, and the guilt was starting to catch up with them. But as bad as they felt about it now, the lads were certain that the incident would be laughed off as a joke once their first album reached platinum.

Barren Point Road was their safest option to pull over and inspect their merchandise. This was quite ironic as it was once considered the most dangerous part of town and as recently as two years ago, driving along that road in the dead of night was unheard of. But the boys knew the locale quite well, having spent a bit of time there of late. This would apply to De Varko especially, for he found the inspiration to write his power ballad 'Sex On The Beach' while sitting on the old wooden bridge a few weeks back.

For all intents and purposes, the bandits were home and hosed. By the time they pulled over onto the side of the road near the beach, they had not encountered a single soul interested in them or their crime, helped of course by the late hour of the night. On top of

that, without any cameras in the guitar shop to record their brazen act – and no alarms either - the stolen items would not be missed until almost opening time.

And what amazing items they were.

As the boot was opened, the streetlight above shone down upon the wonders that lay within. Dayne immediately grabbed his guitar and walked closer to the light source, inspecting his prize by turning it over and over, perceiving it from as many angles as he could.

Back in the city, Whimmer took the easier route and had snatched the nearest guitar from its stand, with the poor lighting around the shop not allowing him to choose a design. He ended up amazed by what he had nicked, that being a Stratocaster emblazoned with a dragon and lightning bolt upon a metallic blue surface.

Cook, despite being the drummer, picked up a guitar that happened to be lying flat and in easy reach on the display table. Unfortunately, he only discovered now that his prize had suffered collateral damage, for Dayne's brick must have struck it after passing through the glass. Besides the scratching, which Michael was quite confident of repairing, this mighty axe featured a sword piercing a reddish love heart.

Mark Trotter had thought outside the square when it was his turn to climb through the broken glass. He noticed two dark rectangular objects and snapped both up as quickly as he could. The items were quite heavy, and he needed to tuck one under each arm as he ran toward the waiting car. It turned out that he had lifted two speakers, or something similar that the stolen guitars could plug into.

Dayne was snapped out of his hypnotic state when his friends called him over, interrupting his deep and meaningful romantic moment with his new guitar. Peering inside the boot and now noticing for the first time what Trotter had lifted, De Varko immediately

congratulated his friend, pointing out that their electric guitars would be useless without these items. Trotter quickly reminded his colleagues that keyboardists are the smartest members of any rock outfit.

It was agreed that the band should not meet for a couple of days until everything blows over. Each member would take their own items home with them and practise alone for the time being. This all changed after learning of the newspaper article about their exploits a few days later.

It was Michael Cook who happened to come across it in his dad's daily broadsheet, and he quickly tore the page out and informed his mates, prompting an emergency meeting of the band members that afternoon in Dayne's bedroom. *'Thieves with a good ear for music!'* was the headline for the page five article - but more troubling was the large photo attached of the broken shop window, with three smaller inset pictures of each missing guitar.

These three items were the headline act and according to the report, the shop owner was extremely distraught over the matter. Dayne's heart skipped a beat when reading that the proprietor claimed he had a 'very good idea' who stole them. But he felt a lot better when perusing deeper into the article, laughing aloud when the owner claimed that the guitar now in Dayne's possession had been reserved by Eddie Van Halen.

The truth was the fool had no idea where his guitars were or who stole them. He was simply using the newspaper article to draw out the thieves or hope that someone might anonymously return them out of shame.

Although the contents of the article were harmless, its implications were not. There were dozens of people around Denne alone that knew how much De Varko coveted that guitar. This was partly his own fault as it was all he ever talked about; that and Jon Bon Jovi.

There would also be the hundreds of folks who would have seen him staring at the prize through the shop window almost every day, however it was not a crime to look at a guitar.

As proud as the teenagers were of their successful heist, the reality was they were only one phone call away from becoming undone. There were dozens of snitches in Denne alone, most of whom would not hesitate to ring the police after reading the article - even more so if they fell for the bullshit Van Halen story and believed there was a chance to meet the legendary guitarist as a reward.

Because of that article, there was simply too much heat on the thieves and hiding in their bedrooms until the story dissipated was not going to be good enough.

De Varko and the lads knew what they had to do.

Cherry picking was something that Dayne and Jason would often partake in for a little extra money on the side. They would drive down to the southernmost towns in the state, two hours or so from the city and sign up at the local farms. A couple of days' work would net them a hundred dollars in cash and the pair would sleep in the station wagon to save money.

With little time to lose, the lads all ran back to their homes and packed a small overnight bag, as it was time to get out of town. It was all rushed and done in great haste, yet luckily their sleeping arrangements would not end up with all four being crammed into the same vehicle. Cook, in his great wisdom, was organised enough to bring a two-person tent with him which drew sighs of relief from his three colleagues when revealed prior to departure.

Within an hour of discovering the newspaper article, the boys had already left Denne. Passing through the city and continuing via the southern outlet, the lads could feel the pressure ease once the urban sprawl was well behind them. The fruit farms where they hoped

to pick up a day or two's work were still an hour ahead of them, and by the time the band would arrive there, they and their stolen goods would be well out of reach.

The decent sized town of Tunney would be their only pitstop on the way through to the remote, isolated farms. This was the last chance the band would have to fill the station wagon up with petrol and pick up food and other supplies. There were no towns further south than Tunney - nothing but dirt roads and scattered farms until the rugged coast met the Southern Ocean.

Dayne was considerate enough to move his wagon away from the bowser after paying the attendant who filled the tank with fuel. The sole employee of the Tunney BP was an elderly gentleman whose grease and oil-stained overalls suggested he doubled as the town mechanic. Despite having already seen the colour of the lads' money, the old man nevertheless continued eyeing them suspiciously when they entered the store. Dayne with his long hair, tight jeans and guitar strapped over his shoulder being one possible reason.

Having purchased their soft drinks, potato chips and lollies, the lads left the small supermarket and loaded the shopping bags into the boot. They had only driven a short distance along the deserted road, when a large poster on the sandstone wall of the colonial-styled Tunney Hotel caught their eye.

Dayne immediately hit the brakes.

The Tunney Hotel was famous, as it claimed to be the southern-most pub in Australia and a large sign on its roof boasted as much. But it was not the novelty of stopping there for a drink that caused the band to park on the street opposite. They had all spotted the artwork and were now scurrying across the road toward the small car park by the side of the building. Dayne arrived a few seconds behind his friends as he once again opened the boot to retrieve his guitar, for he was clearly not willing to go anywhere without it.

The lads could not believe their eyes for the poster was larger than the boys first realised - too big to fit on any of their bedroom walls. But it was not about Bon Jovi as they first thought when driving past, but rather a tribute band by the name of 'Tokyo Road'. The advertisement was for a one-night show that just so happened to take place last night, with the wording on the poster stating that the band were from Melbourne.

The artwork and design looked great, and the band members certainly resembled Bon Jovi enough to have the Denne boys fooled the first time they laid eyes on them. The faces on the poster had the teased hair and pouting down pat, although Dayne would have himself believe that he resembled Jon Bon Jovi more than the lead singer of Tokyo Road.

Mark Trotter leaned in and began carefully trying to peel the edges of the sign from the rough sandstone blocks. To his delight, he discovered the thick paper was coming away from the wall with little chance of tearing. It was during this moment when a toot from a car horn behind them caught the lads unaware. With great intrigue, they watched as a white hatchback with provisional plates slowly pulled into the pub car park – with their curiosity turning to excitement when four attractive girls hopped out.

"I thought you guys had already gone!"

The girls, being Tunney locals, had been looking forward to the concert all week. They had arrived early last night, not wanting to miss out on a table close to the stage. It was fortunate that they did, for the show had attracted patrons from dozens of surrounding towns, and the pub was packed.

Dressed up and wearing thick makeup, the chicks looked older than they truly were, which was their every intention. The girls waved and shook every curve of their bodies toward the performers on stage to catch their eyes. If they could not get their hands on Bon Jovi, then Tokyo Road would have to do – and at one stage of the concert, the lead singer

noticed the blown kisses and waves coming from their table. In response while performing ‘*Never Say Goodbye*’ a few songs later, he cheekily directed a couple of lines toward the adoring girls.

“Remember when we lost the keys?...

...And you lost more than that in my back seat, baby.”

The wink he gave after dedicating that part of the song to the young women was all it took to send them into hysterics. Unfortunately, the theatrics were lost on the naïve girls, who misconstrued this as a prelude to a hook up after the show. The obsessed quartet remained at their table after the gig had ended, continuing to proposition the band members as they packed away their equipment. Realising that a bunch of teenage groupies were about to ambush them, the band requested the publican direct them through a side door in order to make a hasty escape.

Now the girls had caught the band returning to take their poster down, or so they thought. Learning their lesson from the previous evening, the femme fatales moved in for the kill and cornered the confused lads. The members of the faux Tokyo Road were now surrounded and the local girls wasted little time pressing ahead with the unfinished business from last night.

“You’re the drummer, right?” One of the girls, a blonde wearing incredibly tight jeans, asked Jason Whimmer.

“No. Michael’s the drummer.” He answered, pointing toward his tubby mate.

The girl appeared a little confused at first, before seemingly acknowledging her mistake.

“Oh well. I told my friends last night I was going to do the drummer. I guess that’s you!”

The girl reached out to a stunned Cook and grabbed his forearm, pulling him away from the poster that was left half hanging. The puzzled would-be drummer turned to his mates for help, but they were just as perplexed as he was. Instinctively, they knew that this had to be a mix up of some kind - but if this girl was going to take Michael somewhere private and ravage him, then who were they to act as the fun police and clear up the misunderstanding.

The Denne lads had been watching on in disbelief as Michael disappeared behind the pub with the girl, until a sudden click of someone’s fingers brought them all back into the moment. As soon as the boys turned around to face the girls once more, it became clear to them that Mark Trotter’s number had just been called out.

“Keyboard guy?” The dark-haired babe asked whilst she tantalisingly pointed toward him.

“Yes?” Mark answered nervously.

The girl’s outstretched finger gestured for him to approach her and the young man did exactly that without hesitation. She then locked arms with the keyboardist and led him away toward the trees at the rear of the car park. Dayne and Jason noticed the almighty bulge in their friend’s pants as he was taken away, and chances were so did the young seductress.

The remaining two girls then turned to face Dayne and Jason, eyeing them up and down as if deciding which one they were choosing.

“Wanna come back to my place?” The blonde spokeswoman propositioned.

“Sure. Do you live nearby?” Dayne replied, looking toward Jason for any sign of concurrence.

“Just down the road.” The other girl intervened.

“Show us the way.” Jason gestured toward their hatchback.

“Hang on. What about our mates?” Dayne suddenly remembered that Michael and Mark had already been dragged away.

“They’ll be fine. I’m sure Sally and Leanne aren’t being too...”

The girl’s sentence was left hanging as a pale green Kombi van approached slowly and pulled into the car park not far from where they were standing. Dayne and Jason looked on nervously, somehow already knowing who the vehicle belonged to. The two girls’ eyes were also fixed on the van, with the strange expressions on their faces perhaps suggesting they had seen it before. By the time the doors flew open, and the real Tokyo Road stepped out onto the gravel, both Dayne and Jason were ready to flee.

“Who the hell are you?” The blonde turned back around and screamed toward the pair, who were about to start running toward their car.

“Michael! Mark! We have to go!” Dayne yelled out in the hope that his friends could hear him.

All the shouting had caused the band members to take an interest in what was happening next to their poster. Realising they had their attention; the blonde ran across toward the rock idols and began asking for their assistance. Dayne and Jason made their play, sprinting away and had reached the car within a few seconds. The driver quickly turned the engine over and sounded out three loud honks of the horn. It was hoped their missing friends would hear all the commotion and return as quickly as possible.

With the car window open, Dayne and Jason could hear the blonde girl telling the band that the strangers who had arrived in town were impersonating them. The brunette then walked across the car park and was calling out to her friend who had escorted Michael behind the building.

“Leanne! Leanne! He’s not the drummer! He’s not the drummer!”

As if on cue, Michael emerged from around the corner without his trousers and was running as fast as he could toward the awaiting station wagon. In a flash he had clambered into the back seat, and urged the driver to hit the gas, momentarily forgetting they were still one member short. Away in the distance, the girl Cook had been with staggered into view whilst struggling to pull her jeans up.

The band watching on were not about to offer any assistance it seemed, laughing uncontrollably at the youth who had just run semi-naked across the car park. One of the members then pointed toward the trees, to the right of where they were standing. More hysterics ensued as Mark came sprinting out of the foliage wearing only his underpants.

“Aren’t you going to do anything?” The blonde screamed at the real Tokyo Road, clearly incensed by their reaction.

“This is what you get for being little root rats!” The lead singer, wearing tight leather pants and an open sleeveless vest, answered cruelly.

He and his colleagues watched as the last of the boys made it to the safety of the idling station wagon, before it kicked into gear and sped away out of town. Once the show was over, the band did not give any of the girls a second look and walked into the hotel. Moments later, they re-emerged carrying a large black box that they had misplaced from the night before.

“Have a nice day, ladies.” One of the members offered the four girls who were still watching on dumbfoundedly.

The real Tokyo Road left Tunney only minutes after their doppelgangers.

Neither they nor the rock stars from Denne would ever play there again.

THE END