



Secret Origin of the Soft

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by Evan Willner

This one was always going to be the hardest. Everything else, every other thing in here was something I looked for, as in researched, and honestly, I left the Soft for last. But after all that looking, how do you step back and say, “Now let me tell you about the lenses I’ve been

looking through all this time”? This book wouldn’t exist if it weren’t for the Soft. I’m not fully convinced I would exist if it weren’t for the Soft, at least not in my present state. How to tell about them, how to write about them, which I knew was necessary if this book was to have any point at all, became, as each successive chapter clicked into place, more and more like a koan. How do I write about the Soft? What was my face before I was born?

A little dramatic maybe.

I had two plans. The reasons they’d both fail were closely linked.

First, I thought I’d write about what it was like for me actually seeing the Soft for the first time. I was going to lay down my Paul on the road to Damascus experience, my Augustine reading about Paul on the road to Damascus experience, how the scales fell from my ears, how I stopped drinking midbeer after the first song rather than risk missing the smallest detail of their set, how I rushed out of the Madrid the moment they finished playing sure that if I were to brush shoulders with any

one of them at the bar I’d combust, overwhelmed by the contact like the touch of angels. I was going to write about getting home convinced I could somehow compress my favorite albums, my thick and sturdy Hank Williams 45s, my *Ah Um*, my *London Calling*, *Loaded*, *Exile*, my Sarah Vaughn Songbooks, my *Pet fucking Sounds*, compress them all into one seamless thing, convinced I could do it because I’d seen it done on the little stage in the back corner of the Madrid.

Let’s keep in mind, I was 21, prone to hyperbole and drug use.

The trouble with this method, aside from the fact that it blitzes my credibility by portraying me as a drooling idiot fanboy, is that everyone born in Buffalo between 1955 and 1985, wanting to claim themselves hipsters of any sort, has a story about the life altering experience that was the first time they saw the Soft. Or, if they are too cool for school, how they saw the Soft and really weren’t all that impressed. And ninetysome percent of them are outright liars. When I was cruel and young I’d

get kicks poking holes in this or that poseur's story about seeing the Soft, but now I'm content to simply mention that there are a lot of folks out there who would like you to believe they at some point saw the Soft. And you more than likely shouldn't believe them. Likewise, you have no real reason to believe me, so I won't bother asking you to. And so the experiential method was right out.

Then there was research, my trusted friend, darling muse. The entire book you hold in your hands is based firmly in research. Here again I was blocked, and this I believe gets to the heart, or one of the hearts, of the Soft mythology. There are no recordings of the Soft. No studio material. No bootlegs on someone's little handheld taperecorder, fuzzy and filled with mumbled bar conversations. There is a rumor that master recordings of the studio album still exist, but all leads on this ran dry. While I turned up crowds of people who were willing to recount in vivid detail their personal experience at a Soft show, none of them could confirm their attendance. I turned up a total of seven flyers

advertising shows featuring the Soft at various venues around Buffalo, but any one of them could have been produced on a home computer days before I tracked them down simply to impress me.

These are the facts as I know them, the ones I will swear to when they turn the hot lights on me and shove the splinters under my fingernails and eyelids: From 1987 to 1989, there was a band called the Soft playing shows in Buffalo. The band consisted of Johnny Frazer on lead guitar and vocals, Meredith Robbins on vocals and rhythm guitar, Casey Kranley on bass and Bill Palast on drums. On April 15th, 1989, a van carrying these individuals flipped over on the interstate, twenty-four miles outside of Buffalo. All four sustained unspecified injuries, and Casey Kranley died en route to the hospital. Shortly after the crash, Bill Palast, whose injuries were rumored to have been severe, left Buffalo for the Midwest, cutting all ties to the city. Johnny Frazer turned down a number of recording offers and went into relative seclusion. Merri Robbins was signed

to Empirical Records four months after the accident and her debut album, "Floorflower" (1990) went double platinum, received a Grammy nomination and was *Rolling Stone's* runner up for Album of the Year. When an interviewer for *Spin* magazine asked why she never played shows in her hometown, she responded, "I loath Buffalo." These are unarguable facts, at least in my mind. I'm not sure anymore how much of my skepticism has been warranted, and there are those whose testimony I am willing to believe, but before we go any further, I must admit that after months of research, I can produce no hard evidence that the Soft ever existed as a band.

So I'm left with only a description of a method. Bits, pieces, the mirror reassembled with wood glue and the description of the pretty hardware store clerk who sold me the wood glue and how maybe the mirror was broken by a ball peen hammer or a bloodied forehead. I'm here and I'm looking at three months of notes and all I see are fragments, and my face in every one.

I tried to hunt down Bill's whereabouts with no luck.

Merri's agent gave me the runaround for a while, then flat out told me that Ms. Robbins would not answer any questions about her time in Buffalo and I should hang it up. Johnny, after weeks of badgering, said he admired my perseverance and agreed to meet me for a drink. We got together late on a Thursday night at the Old Pink, a little dive on the east edge of Fredtown. I showed up early and Johnny arrived right on time, shock of white hair standing almost on end, thick flannel coat and little granny glasses. After the introductions I brought out my tape recorder and said, "Tell me about the Soft." Not the most savvy of questions, I know, but that drooling fanboy I mentioned was manning the wheel. Johnny sipped his beer, and without looking up, he said to me, "When Edward Abbey talked about the Great American Desert, and he always called it that: the Great American Desert. He said, my first bit of advice is, Don't Go. He said it was all hard things, and he said the Soft evolve out." Then he looked up at me from underneath those glasses, and the lenses were so thin they might not have

been there at all, and asked, “You ever been to the Great American Desert?” I shook my head and he nodded his and said, “We never think we have, or we never talk about it. But we’ve been. Most of us, some nights, we’ve been.” We talked for hours that night, and that was as close as we came to talking about the band. Some of it I have on tape, and I listen to it, now and then, nights my woman’s gone, nights I can’t sleep and she can, and the liquor isn’t working quite like it should. I listen to it in the dark with one of those smiles you have when you’re not crying. I listen and try to remember which voice is his and which one’s mine.

He’s from here originally, they all are. I’ve confirmed this; I’ve found school records for all four of them. None of them seem to have remarkable childhood stories; all of them are from good homes, all that noise. Johnny was born in 1945, over at Sisters of Mercy Hospital, he bopped from one PS to another through elementary and high school, all within the city, and took a job at Nazareth Steel right after graduation. He managed to

avoid military service and married when he turned twenty-two, a slightly older receptionist at Nazareth named Angela Dinerstein. The two lived in an apartment in Fredtown until Angela’s untimely death in 1985. Not to say that death is ever timely. Bill Palast grew up in the Buffalo suburb of McKinley and attended the University of Buffalo, studying Agricultural Planning. After graduation he continued working at the Upper Room, a local coffeeshop where he’d been employed part time since his junior year of college. Merri Robbins and Casey Kranley, both two years older than Bill, met in their sophomore year at UB and started dating shortly after. At the end of their junior year, the couple moved to New York, supposedly so that Casey could pursue his career as an artist. After a year and a half, the couple returned to Buffalo, rarely speaking about their time in New York. Rumors that one or both of them had become addicted to heroin and had left New York to clean up don’t rise above the level of tabloid accusations.

That’s the stage set, more or less, that’s everyone up

to speed for 1987. Which, researchwise is really where the problems get started. The real beginning. I got the story from a number of people that the Soft had formed in the basement of a vegetarian coop on campus. I even ran into some cat that said he lived in the house at the time, a guy named Akil Bello, lanky beatish guy with one of those little soul patch nonsense things hanging off his lower lip. If it's not already coming across, I didn't entirely trust this character. Some friends of friends put him in touch with me and he seemed a little too anxious to get his name in a book, and well Akil, here you are. He didn't drink, so we went out for tea. Of course, it should be noted I grew up on John Wayne flicks and the Duke says never trust a man who doesn't drink.

"We'd thrown this party for Halloween, everybody all dressed up and all," Akil informed me. "And I thought we should hire a band, like to play in the basement. So we talked to these kids we knew at school, they were going for this whole Go-Gos meets New Order thing. I think they'd played out at the Madrid once or twice,

but I don't think anyone showed up. So we told them we'd give them fifty bucks and I gave a check to the lead singer chick, whose name was Jenny Somethingorother, but they ditched on us. Then halfway through the party, this guy Casey, who I knew from like freshman year or something, we dorned right down the hall from each other. He comes up and says he and his girlfriend can do it, can play for a while if they go home and get some stuff. And I said, there's no way we can pay you, and they said that's fine, so they went and got some stuff and came back and played in the basement til like two in the morning. Around midnight this guy Billy we knew from the coffeeshop started playing drums with them. Then at like two-thirty, after the bars let out, this old guy comes wandering in, and no one knows who invited him, it's like he's just wandering around with a guitar on his back. Like Kane from Kung Fu, you know? And he asks Casey if he can join in. No, wait, he asks Merri, that's what it was. And they're all ragged at this point and they say sure and he joins in and they just ripped.

Til like five. I think even the cops showed up and they just kept playing.”

So that’s Akil’s story. There’s more actually, but I’ll spare it. I can’t disprove Akil’s story, although I wish I could, cause after all, what’s with a scrawny beatish white kid being named Akil? Secretly I believe his name to be Steve, but only in this general way you might believe generic males to be Steves, and I have no evidence. As I said, a number of people were willing to back him up, although most of them at Akil’s personal urging and none of them with significant detail. The major problems with his story are the fact that, as any borderline alcoholic Buffalo resident knows, the bars in Buffalo don’t let out til four, if they let out at all, and he is utterly unable (trust me, I asked. Repeatedly) to explain what Johnny Frazer, by this time a late forty-year-old posterboy for the working class, would have been doing at the vegetarian coop equivalent of a frat party. That, and he couldn’t remember what costumes he or any of the supposed band members were wearing.

Is it abnormal that I remember all of my life’s Halloween costumes and expect others to do the same?

There were a total of thirteen people who wanted me to believe that all of the members of the Soft were occasional sidewalk performers and the band formed out of an argument over the right to the turf near a stop on the Metro in the summer of 1987. Oddly, all of these folks seemed to be talking about the same date, the second Saturday in August, and all gave accurate descriptions of the individuals involved. In each account, Merri and Casey had the spot first on that particular day and were performing very folksy duets when a surly Johnny Frazer, who played that stop every other Saturday, accosted them. Before things could escalate, Billy Palast, who had been playing a primitive drum set up on the next corner and knew all three from the Upper Room, came and made peace between the threesome and convinced them to play together, with him noodling around on drums. They all agreed and within an hour had attracted a crowd that spilled over

onto the subway tracks, stopping trains. I'd be willing to believe this story, because it's got that Willy and the Poor Boys thing going on, if it weren't for the fact that none of my supposed witnesses could agree on which subway stop the action went down at. Thirteen witnesses, four supposed stops. Muddy waters at best.

More plausible, to me at least, is the story I got from Dean Lubnick, owner and proprietor of the Upper Room. Dean got credibility points for being the owner of a fantastic coffeeshop rather than a half homeless street performer or soul patch punk, but more than that, I wanted to trust Dean. Dean was a big man with a full beard, an air of grandfatherliness and a bottle of Maker's Mark in the bottom drawer of his desk. Dean was one of those guys for whom coolness is not even an issue, which made him mindbogglingly cool. You're catching the past tense here, right? Dean passed away in his sleep a few weeks ago. He lost his wife last year and there was this sense about Dean, by the time I met him, that he was sort of done with things, or at least finishing

up. After my interview with him, he and I started getting together on a semiregular basis for lunch, always at my request. There were three hundred people at Dean's funeral. I'd like to let Dean talk now.

"I always feel, whenever I'm telling it, like I'm saying, you know, I swear the fish was *this big*. A lot of the kids ask me to tell them about it when they find out. But Johnny used to come in and do old Carter family songs at the open mics, I dunno, once a month or so. He'd wail them, and do all this wild stuff on the guitar. It was always kind of nice for me to have someone a little closer to my age around sometimes [he laughed, which lit up his whole body and caused him to pour me out a much appreciated little more whiskey]. Sometimes I'd let Billy off the bar to put a little snare behind him, it was real nice, real Civil War old timey. And the night it happened it was Merri's 21st birthday. No, that's not right, it was Casey's birthday. I don't know how old. They were all there, a pack of them and their friends, a little drunk but well behaved. Merri got up, I remember,

and sang happy birthday to Casey, all slinky and Marilyn Monroe and all. I mean, I'm a married man, or I was then anyways, but Jesus. And when she gets done all the kids are cheering her on, so Casey gets up there and Merri goes to the piano and the two of them play Hickory Wind, him just playing real loose on the acoustic. I don't think Casey was ever much of a real guitar player, but Christ, the voice on her. And right as they're starting, Johnny walks in. So they did a couple I didn't know and right after, Johnny goes up to the two of them and I see him bringing out some sheets of music. I'd never seen Johnny with sheet music before; he knew all those Carter family songs like it was his last name. But whatever he said to them, Casey went running off and came back a few minutes later with his bass and I could see Johnny showing him something on the guitar and Casey just nodding away. He picked things up quick, you could tell that. And Johnny was singing to Merri real quiet like, and writing out words for her on a sheet of paper. And naturally Billy, who just

knew everybody that ever walked into that shop, just the sweetest kid, he goes over to see what all's going on.

“And that was it, I guess. The last act signed up that night was going to be Johnny and it ended up being the four of them together. I remember Billy was playing the little snare we kept around for him and a cymbal he made out of the steel top of an old water cooler. They started out with Hickory Wind again, and it just sounded full. It sounded done. Then they went into what must've been the songs Johnny'd showed them, I hadn't heard any of them before, and Merri sounded a little tentative, her and Casey were sober by then and kept giving each other these nervous looks, but you could tell there was something there. And after all the acts were over, and everybody'd come up to the four of them and asked how long they'd been playing and what they were called, and they just shrugged em all off. When my wife and I went out the first time, I still remember, we'd gone to a movie and out to a dance at the VFW. And we got to the dance and somebody asked us if we were going

together now, and how long we'd been steady. And we just gave each other this look, and almost laughed and didn't answer. Like we knew something they didn't. That's how those kids looked. To me at least. Usually after the acts were done we'd chase the rest of the kids out so we could clean up and shut down. By that time, most of them were ready to head home or out to the bars anyway. But Billy asked if maybe he and these guys could stick around a little longer and I didn't see any harm in it. Billy'd been with me almost three years and I trusted him. Next morning when I came in to open up, the four of them were still there. Billy was curled up on one of the couches with Johnny's jacket over him, but the other three looked like they'd been playing all night and would've kept playing all day if I'd've let em. Almost did let em."

I dug and dug to find another person to corroborate Dean's story. I did everything short of interrogating the mourners at his funeral. If one person in this city had just mentioned the Upper Room and Hickory Wind in

the same sentence, I would've gleefully burned all my notes on the subway story and destroyed all of Akil's interview tapes. After two months, I found exactly the type of thing I'd been afraid of: Casey Kranley's criminal record, which is relatively short and uneventful, shows he spent the last two and a half hours of his 1987 birthday in a cell in the 13th precinct on a drunk and disorderly. Meredith Robbins bailed him out just after one in the morning.

Those are the stories I have; those are the beginnings I found. Maybe it'll go easier for you if you pick one before you go on, like one of those *Choose Your Own Adventure* books we read when we were kids. It's fine by me, I loved those things. In sixth grade my parents found out I'd done a book report on one, and they couldn't understand me when I explained that it was okay because I hadn't done it right, I read the book cover to cover, page by page and had this story that was fractured and contradictory and so much cooler than when you followed each of the narrow little paths the

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author laid out for you. I told them doing it that way turned the book into this thing that was like seeing how the future worked, and how reading it was like coming unstuck in time. They grounded me anyway.

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