

**Goran Tribuson**

***Grass And Weed***

**Translated from Croatian by Željko Bobanović and Caroline Hopkins**

### **Diary of a Rock Freak**

*How we grew up with the Rolling Stones*

From a window in the neighborhood hundred-watt speakers are blaring out; a kid from the nearby building is playing *Anybody Seen My Baby* loudly, probably thinking that the world started with that song. Huh! I could tell him about the heroic age of rock, if he had the patience to listen to an old Stones freak. Because I can still vividly recall that 35 years ago I read in an ideologically disaffected press, a small news item about five hairy guys who make an unbearable noise and who swept off their feet those who had strayed into London clubs. As a fifteen-year old “macho kid” from the provinces brought up on the healthy aesthetics of football, westerns and Mickey’s comics I was 100% sure that I would never accept that stupidity of long hair and noisy guitars. But you just try to defy that irresistible tide! About three months after that I already knew by heart, *Carol*, *Little Red Rooster*, *It’s All Over Now* and the rest of the hits, I was fighting for my right to have long hair and gradually becoming the sixth Rolling Stone. My “macho” resistance turned to dust, I was run into the ground like a visiting football team, that despite working the bunker system, the first goal was scored in the second minute and another five before the 20<sup>th</sup> minute.

Today, when I think about that it appears to me, more and more, that as a “respectable” writer I’m in a reserve position. Because, modesty aside, in that fatal year I was already dreaming of becoming a rock and roll star. You run from the dark onto a shiny stage with a Stratocaster in your hand, bang a few male riffs and the audience immediately freaks out: guys get maximum adrenaline, they get a musical erection, chicks PMT problems vanish and everybody, in one voice, shouts: *We want Goran!*

You’ll admit that such a situation looks much more appealing and interesting, than when you, as a representative of a “literal metier”, appear at the public library of Garišnica or the Cultural

Club in Duga Resa, and, in front of two spinsters, a retired teacher, a local weirdo and four timid teenagers, who are secretly writing intimate meditative prose in their *Lipa-Mill* notebooks, start reading the most beautiful parts from the book which won you the famous prize from Sisak's Steel Factory.

So why didn't you become one? – bluntly asks my old friend Kompa. The same guy who, in that distant 1963, managed to hear *Come On* two days before me. The Rolling Stones' sensational hit with which everything started.

Why didn't I become one?! – I'm both confused and angry, today coming up with, within my own history, hundreds of completely acceptable modern answers. It was the fucked up time of single party thinking, the communist tyranny that suffocated any spark of individuality, to be a rock star you needed to be a confirmed member of the party, rock music was a strictly prohibited import from the decadent West, playing *Satisfaction* or *Play with Fire* could lead you straight to a Communist gulag, apart from which when we tried something we were constantly ignored in favour of Belgrade! That's why I didn't become one!!!

You didn't become one – my friend, Kompa is soothing me with cynical friendliness – because you've only managed to play three accords. – Though even with that it was possible to play at least half of those popular songs, –but you my old mate never learned how to change grips. Your fingers would get stiff and stick on the guitar neck as if you had put them on a fanny.

In any serious public autobiography I would strongly dismiss Kompa's rude remarks, pronounce him a Yugo-nostalgic or at least a Commie, but in this private confession I regrettably have to admit that there is an element of truth in that. Maybe my way to guitar fame was stopped because of my absolute lack of musical talent, which sometimes revealed itself in utterly embarrassing situations. I can remember being in primary school when, during musical education, the class choir was divided into so-called first and second voice, only a certain Tomić and I were put in the least important group of Third voice, which was only supposed to perform a single syllable backing vocal every few minutes. But even with that we were unmistakably spoiling the overall pleasant sound of the choir composition. And soon the teacher, Gordana Mitić, during the singing, started sending us outside into the corridor to water the hortensia and gladiola pots for whose successful growth she was responsible. That

rough discrimination made us, in a music sense, some kind of negroes or similar outsiders and predisposed us to readily accept the *Blues*, that musical expression of “Insulted and Humiliated” which somehow during our first college years appeared in the music of, not the Beatles but the Rolling Stones.

But to correctly understand the spirit of the last big revolution with which the arrival of the Rolling Stones and the Beatles shook the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it’s necessary to picture the musical context into which the first poisonous seed of British Rock and Roll landed. At the beginning of the ‘60s, into our ether the pathetic Stahanov communist worker’s songs were still making a noise with their pick axes and shovels and other production tools in the communist arcadia, as well as the late partisan marches, in which we fearlessly chased the hated Germans, although at that time they’d well occupied the hotels and naturist beaches along the Adriatic coast and filled our budget with foreign currency credits. And toward evening the radio station, weary from its day long revolution and closing war operations, would play folk songs from our brother nations and nationalities and national minorities, sprinkled with easy listening tunes like *Daddy Buy Me A Car*, *Calypso Bus Is My Hobby* and *Amongst Cacti and Aloe*. After three a.m. it would be time for the elitist gourmets when, in the peace of the deep night, classical music was played. Those lucky ones, sometime before dawn, after hearing the Ring of Niebelung and the Valkyrie, were sleepily walking around the house, trying to find their way to bed while, in their heads, Wagners drums and fanfares are still rumbling frighteningly.

This short but precise picture will diminish the importance of my honest confession about my personal lack of musical talent, because at that time, you concluded to yourself, it wouldn’t pay to work on your own musical sensitivity as indeed, for instance, it wouldn’t pay for a Kenyan man to perfect his Grand Slalom technique or for a Hungarian to learn the secrets of growing mussels.

Into this picture of the musical archipelagoes of small provincial towns of the early ‘60s, the appearance of the Rolling Stones and the Beatles were as equally welcome as later the appearance of the potato bug on the potato fields of Lika and Medimurje. Because it immediately became clear that the dangerous virus in a month or two would completely

destroy the precariously built aesthetic of Bilećanke, Bećarac, Duo Hani and Trio Tividi. Maybe for that reason the first newspaper articles about the four long haired guys from Liverpool and the five dirty freaks from Richmond were tainted with the same sensational incredibility with which it was reported that a calf with two heads had been born in South Sass and that a peasant from Schleswig-Holstein has a horse which performs algebra calculations to an audience.