

# **Smokin' We'd Be Everywhere There**

**The night Led Zeppelin played Phoenix**

**(as told to Constance Bowers)**

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You know, sometimes things just slip away and no one's the worse or the wiser for it. And sometimes things just won't go away and no one's the worse or the wiser for that either. This story's somewhere in the middle, or maybe closer to the end, so I'd better start there.

You see, the lighting for the stage largely glowed around Robert Plant, but his face was obscured by the drape of his long blond curls and the way he clutched with both hands the microphone still attached to its stand. Even so, from where we sat, we were close enough to see the lissome, racing fingers that seemed to dance across the strings and frets of John Paul Jones and Jimmy Page's guitars, but John Bonham's hands and arms, even his shoulders, were a blur, whirling like the blades of a turbine, imperceptibly and inexorably lashing and pounding upon his drums. They were taking "Whole Lotta Love" to fever pitch; then without a push, just a nudge, eased, as if a feather dropping, to a stop. The song was over and everyone on stage seemed to disappear. We were quickly standing, clapping, cheering, stomping our feet. Everyone was. Frequent and randomly placed whistles, loud enough to pierce the din, swirled above us from everywhere and a chant of "More! More!" slowly rose in increasing volume and tempo. No telling how long we would have continued. The lights remained low as if to encourage us. But soon Jimmy Page reappeared and grabbed the microphone still standing in the spot he had played his guitar just a moment earlier. Instinctively, the whole arena quieted down:

"Hey, can I just say something?" he began. "You've really been a fantastic audience tonight, but there's been something hanging tonight, which I don't know if you know, but Robert's been very ill tonight, and, as he just came off, he just collapsed, and we just called for a doctor and everything. We'd really like to do more, but obviously this seems impossible. But thanks for being a great audience."

He waved and disappeared again in the darkness at the rear of the stage. The crowd cheered and clapped again, whistles and hoots emanated from everywhere once more—surely not for Robert Plant's collapse, even though I heard someone in the row behind us express a bit of dismay.

"Is that all?" he protested.

But, man, everyone else was stoned and not feeling much like protesting. We were, like the fellow behind us, disappointed, but more to the point, as we stopped clapping and cheering, we were stunned by what we had just seen, what we had just done, what we would never forget. One of the greatest rock and roll bands in the world, in our world that night anyway, had just finished playing for an hour and a half one straight (well, maybe not straight) set of some of the greatest music in the world—to our ears, anyway—climaxing in the collapse off stage of one of the greatest singers in the history of rock and roll.

How did this happen? Not the collapse, of course. We all figured Robert Plant had the flu or something. That was easy to figure out. But how did we end up in the Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Phoenix, Arizona, in seats near center stage just five rows away from where Robert Plant, Jimmy Page, John Paul Jones, and John Bonham had just performed?

Earlier that evening, we were sitting at home consoling Dennis, my twin brother, whom Mom had grounded for life. Well, it only seemed like life. He couldn't leave the house, and it was Saturday night. Our thoughts that night must have included the age-old question: How does something like that always seem to happen to Dennis, the guy who is always happily and bravely trying out new things?

You know, like the time he tried driving our older brother's friend's father's recently deceased mother's car. Well, not like that time, because that was the very reason he was on the outs with mom. It seems late one night, after helping our older brother's friend clean and tidy up the friend's father's real estate office on Camelback Road near 14<sup>th</sup> Street—a task the friend's father had hired his son to do after business hours and an opportunity Dennis jumped at to make some easy money from a job that wasn't really very difficult—our older brother's friend asked Dennis if he'd like to drive the car for a little while.

The streets were empty, which is just an expression, because there was one other car. It had pulled onto the street up ahead and eventually Dennis and our older brother's friend were following it, and probably too closely because the lady driving it was driving very slowly—never any faster than maybe 5 miles over the speed limit. Dennis had decided not to pass her, not because it was illegal, which it was, but because he was going to play it cool because this was his first time driving on the streets. And as fate would have it, Dennis did not yet have a driver's license. And, of course, the lady stopped rather abruptly for a stop sign, which was a mistake because she stopped before Dennis could figure out how to stop his car—I mean, our older brother's friend's father's recently deceased mother's car.

It wouldn't have been so bad; it was just a fender bender and they had convinced the lady not to call the cops; they'd make good on the repairs to both cars. But that was where it all went wrong. Dennis forgot to make good on the repairs or to tell Mom he'd made that promise or made the mistake about driving the car or about the confusion with the braking and the absence of a driver's license. The lady called our brother's friend's father and snitched on Dennis. The friend's father called Mom. And you can see how Dennis was bummed. And why we all said, “Bummer, man.”

The ‘we’ included Tom and Mike. We were all sophomores in high school and looking for something to do on Saturday night.

Mike had a car and, for once, was willing to drive. He was older and licensed and an only child with parents willing to give him a car to drive. They weren't willing, however—at least, according to Mike—to give him gas money or the necessary fill-ups so he would always have enough gas to go anywhere. So Mike usually claimed to be on empty and broke. We always claimed pretty much the same thing except that we didn't have a car.

But, as I said, on this rare occasion, Mike had enough gas to get us somewhere and was grudgingly willing to burn it. He also had more than a little money that night and was eager to spend it as long it was going to be spent on him.

Maybe we could do something involving girls and maybe, just maybe for once we could do something without worries about the travel time and distance. So we started to think. I mean we started to dream. What we didn't think is that anything would come of whatever it was we would decide to do.

One of us mentioned that Led Zeppelin was playing at the Coliseum. I think it was Dennis, but I don't really remember, and I don't really think it matters. So why even mention it—because a light came on, the proverbial kind. Led Zeppelin was going to be playing at the Coliseum. This was the place the Ringling Bros. & Barnum & Bailey Circus played; the Phoenix Suns played basketball there; Johnny Cash put on a show there (mostly June Carter, who apologized for Johnny having one of his colds). The place was cavernously big; thousands of people, people like us, I mean kids and long-hairs and people who wished they were long hairs and maybe a few narcotic agents, you know, Narcs, would be there. Tonight it would be a different kind of circus or game or show, and we thought maybe we could hang out outside in the parking lot, the way we'd do in the fall on a Saturday night outside the Sun Devil stadium when ASU's football games were going on.

We didn't much care about the game, which we rarely saw, even when we'd climb to the top of Tempe Butte that the stadium butted up against. At the top, we could get a bird's-eye view while listening to the crowd inside roar and checking out the crowd outside stare, dream-like, at each other. We were there to dream, too, to dream about finding among all the hundreds of other dreamers perhaps something new or, as Johnny Rocco in the movie *Key Largo* might say, something more. If booze or drugs or reports from someone about where we could get booze or drugs and a girlfriend or two were mixed into it, the dream was always worth it. Usually, maybe even always, it wasn't worth it. But that didn't stop the dreaming.

We drove west on Indian School Road to 24<sup>th</sup> Street, then south a couple of miles to McDowell. It was pretty much straight going for nearly seven miles on surface streets. The streets in Phoenix in 1970 were pretty much like that. Not many freeways. Not many curves.

Not much to say either. At some point, Mike shared that he would be with Shirley, his girlfriend, but that they weren't speaking to each other, which Tom and I interpreted to mean that she had come to her senses. We didn't really like Mike. He was a loudmouth, cheap, and, although we didn't know the meaning of the words back then, we had long suspected he was narcissistic and cynical. The cynical part we easily understood; he was always about what's in it for him, but how he could be in love with himself and expecting everyone, especially the girls, to simply love him, too, always amazed us. He wasn't very tall and slightly pudgy. His teeth were straight, but seemed overpopulated in a mouth that, when he smiled, splayed what looked like Chiclets. And

his hair was always combed and coiffed to regulation size, like Officer Pete Malloy on *Adam-12*. He was rude, insensitive, a poser. Did I already say loudmouth? But he had a car, and for sophomores in high school in Phoenix in 1970, who didn't have a car, not even a driver's license, that meant a lot. So, yeah, I know what you're thinking—we were using him. A little narcissistic and cynical ourselves.

It was still early and we knew we had lots of time to get there, even though we were driving clear across town on McDowell Road past Central and all the way to 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue, where we turned to park because parking would be free there. The street was one block east of the Coliseum. It was a residential street and on this particular night lined with a train of parked cars. We cruised along until we found a spot.

Once on foot, we at first followed, then mingled with clusters of people looking very cool, older than we were, wearing well-worn bellbottoms, corduroy jackets, some in sandals, some in boots, some of the women with floppy broad-brimmed hats, some of the men with beards, all of them with long hair. They probably had the same idea we had: to be at the coolest happening in Phoenix ever and ever and ever for a Saturday night in April.

So we joined with them in a walk through the open-air, single-level parking lot already packed with a sea of cars and throngs of people streaming from all directions toward the lone, towering centerpiece that, like its Roman namesake, fit the scale and allure of this kind of event. Like the one in Rome, this Coliseum was circular and rose several stories high. Unlike Rome's, it had a roof that resembled the shape of a Pringles potato chip, evenly and slightly slopping from the north and south ends of the building.

The police were there, as well, lots of them, equipped with flashlights and other more deadly accoutrements to intimidate and otherwise dissuade anything illegal from also happening. We all knew, of course, that they were really there just to prevent us or anyone from having any fun. We knew, too, that such a show of force meant that what was happening was going to be worth the snarling disapproval on the faces of the men, and it seemed to be only men, in blue.

As we got close to the building, we, like everyone else, easily navigated around the candy-striped barricades, where police officers repeated the same refrain over and over:

“Ticketholders only on the terrace!”

We knew without tickets we would not get far, but we were in a current and kept moving toward the ramp.

“The police are checking tickets on the ramp,” we overheard some in the crowd grumbling. And there they were, flashlights scanning the faces, the arms, the hands, the ground, and anything else associated with the crush of people being stopped halfway up the ramp. The lucky ones with tickets were being allowed to continue; the unlucky ones were being turned around.

Maybe 30 feet wide and divided right down the middle by a metal handrail, the ramps were the only way to get up to the terrace and the terrace was the only way to get into the building. There were two ramps on this side of the building, one to the left of the box office, one to the right. And we could have imagined a similar scene on the other side had we let our imaginations work on it, but we were busy keeping afloat.

In front of the box office, our movement had slowed. The crowd was thick. People were in line for tickets, others, and this seemed to be most, were making up their minds. A din of talking, sometimes laughing, but mostly muffled fragments of conversation swirled like an eddy around us. We were still moving, and floated steadily to the left up the ramp to the right until we slowed again as we got closer to the first checkpoint, which was also on our left, but on the other side of the center handrail, stopping everyone who was also on that side. The other checkpoint, the one on our side, was a little ways ahead, leaving a gap along the handrail of perhaps 20 feet where no one was checking tickets.

Mike was the first of us to recognize this gap as a flaw in the design or the first to see that others had already detected the flaw and taking advantage of this oversight (or is it undersight?). Anyway, beyond these two stops everyone was freely moving up to the terrace unimpeded.

Once we reached the gap between checkpoints, Mike tapped Tom on the shoulder, as if to say, "Hey! Follow me," then nonchalantly made his way to the handrail at the middle of the gap. Tom and I followed him.

"Tell me if they're looking," he very coolly said, setting his butt on the rail and staring off to nowhere so as to avoid detection.

Anticipating Mike's next move, Tom and I looked around as nonchalantly as we could manage. The police seemed to take no notice. They were busy checking tickets.

"No one's looking," one of us whispered. Or maybe we just nodded anxiously, signally to Mike the message, "Go!"

He pivoted his entire body, swinging his legs over the rail. It happened in an instant and he was standing on the other side. And just as quickly, he was camouflaging himself in the stream of ticketholders who had successfully negotiated their way through the police checkpoint and were on their way with Mike to the terrace.

Tom and I followed his lead. Yes, Mike was now our leader. First Tom, then I, swung our legs over to the other side and quickly hid among the regulars as we made our way to the terrace. No one in the crowd seemed to notice. At least, they didn't seem to care that we had gotten this far without tickets. It could have been that we were playing it so very cool and blending so well that no one suspected that we had gotten this far without tickets. Most likely, it was that we were not

the only ones around us who had done the same thing, and you know what they say about security in numbers.

Now, on the terrace, we wandered around. Several police officers were wandering around, too, either in pairs or individually. They weren't checking tickets; they were checking doors.

The Coliseum on the terrace level was ringed by a chain of glass doors, which could only be opened from the inside. One of those doors closest to the spot where the ramp connected to the terrace was propped open and staffed by a contingency of Coliseum attendants and a few policemen. It was the only available entry to the arena that we could see and a port of entry that definitely required tickets.

Common sense dictated that we stay away from that door. It also told us to keep moving. We were not the only ones not queuing with tickets we did not have, in a line with those who did, so we instinctively walked in a direction that we hoped would be interpreted by anyone in authority as merely preference on our part to enter the arena on the other side of the building—we assumed there had to be another door opened on that side and that we could get there from where we were. Not that we would get in a line there either. We simply wanted to delay the inevitable as long as possible, convinced that at some point someone was going to ask to see our tickets, and, when we couldn't produce them, would ask us to go and go immediately. Maybe on our way to this other door and inevitably back down the ramp we could think of something else to go to.

As we were pondering all these inevitabilities, we could see through the glass doors streams of people inside hurrying one way or the other along the concourse. Its polished gleam of white floors and overhead lighting shone through the doors onto the terrace, casting Mike, Tom, and me, and the many others, who were probably also at this point attempting to avoid detection and trying to think of something else to go to, as a backdrop of shadows and silhouettes. We could also see in an entirely different light a policeman or two patrolling the concourse inside.

Like a water main exploding, one of the doors was suddenly flung open and a group of terrace people, near enough to get sucked in, gushed through the opening and scurried in every direction once inside until they had completely disappeared. Just as quickly the patrolmen inside responded with their proverbial wrenches in hand and soon secured the leak, then dashed off to do their real job and apprehend.

“Holy shit, that guy's doing it!” Mike laughed, at first pointing, then abruptly snapping his hand back to his side so as not to give anything away.

He was right. Some fellow looking a bit like Ringo Starr, perhaps a couple of years older than we were, sporting, I suppose, an early attempt at growing a beard, and grinning as he moved along the middle of the concourse at the same pace we were moving, was definitely looking out

through the doors at anyone who was looking in at him. It was as if he were sending a signal, and we were receiving it.

We at once adjusted our orbit and gravitated closer to the doors. There weren't enough police; we, at least, didn't see any nearby. The Ringo Starr fellow must have realized as much, for, suddenly, he dash toward us, and, with a precision that could only come from years of practice, struck the cross rail on the door with his hands, flinging the door open just enough to thrust, pull, push, and otherwise suck us onto the other side where, once inside, we ran, more like rocketed, quite unceremoniously and quite quickly and quite I don't know what to where we weren't sure, all the while fired by exhilaration, panic, and good deal of disbelief.

Now what? We hadn't thought that far ahead. How was it possible no one was chasing us? We had to be obvious. But we weren't dwelling on that tiny detail either. "Fuck, man!" is about all we could muster as we eventually slowed to a stop at the end of the tunnel that had miraculously appeared on the other side of the concourse on our flight from the door and which we instinctively blasted our way through without attracting any attention.

We would have kept running, but we found ourselves standing at the entrance to what resembled the innards of a gigantic beehive buzzing with activity. People were moving every which way in the hundreds, maybe the thousands, of aisles and rows of seats. Lots of them were sitting and still moving while many others were still moving and not sitting, looking, of course, for somewhere to sit. It was a sight that we had seen multiple times on a much smaller scale at football and basketball games for school, but this was—what? Our minds were racing to catch up with the events that had put us in this spot.

A section of empty seats down the steps just below us looked inviting.

"Good?" Mike asked, slightly jerking his head to point in that direction.

"Anything, man," Tom said. I nodded in agreement, so we ambled our way down to seats at the bottom of the section. Nobody seemed to notice or even care. Did anyone have tickets for this concert?

I sat down, setting my elbow on the armrest, and something stung me. This bee analogy was a little too real. I jerked my elbow up and clasped it in my hand, feeling something wet. Blood! Not a lot. Just enough to smear a thin red splotch across my fingers. I looked at Tom and Mike, who were panning the arena oblivious to one another and to me. Good. They hadn't noticed.

My shirt was short-sleeved, a blue floppy-collared polo shirt with alternating black and red pin-stripes criss-crossing diagonally. My elbow was exposed, so I guessed that I had banged it against the frame of the door in the crush of people that had rushed inside with us. Concerned that my injury may warrant a command decision to leave a wounded comrade behind in order that Mike and Tom could complete the mission without the burden of having to drag me along—



okay, so I had watched enough episodes of *Combat* to know that's how it works—I quietly, secretly rubbed the splotch of blood on my hand onto my Levi's behind my knee.

"These aren't very good seats," Mike complained. I immediately concurred. If we had tickets, I wouldn't want these seats. We were up pretty high up and, besides, there were plenty of empty seats on the floor in front of the stage.

"Hey, we've gotten this far, and I don't see anyone checking," Tom wisely observed.

"So they kick us out," Mike's bravado was catching. "Let's go!"

We got up and followed the stairs to the floor where perhaps two hundred folding chairs had been set up right in front of the stage—nice ones, too, the kind with padded seats.

There was still about a half hour before the show and very few of the seats in this section were occupied. Not to be conspicuous, we went only as far as the sixth row and selected seats in front of a group of four or five college-aged guys, at least definitely older than us, who were comfortably lounging and talking and laughing.

"Are these seats taken?" Mike asked in the way of saying, "Okay if we sit here in front of you?"

"Until someone else comes along and takes them," one of them replied with a friendly smile.

"Go on, sit down," the blonde, curly haired and mustachioed Country Joe MacDonalder member of the group offered. "These aren't our chairs either, but we're takin' 'em with us if we're asked to leave."

He had given us license to feel welcomed and entitled, so we laughed in that cool universal language of acknowledgement of true wit and gratitude for the simpatico appeal of his remarks. Well, truth be told, we were slightly embarrassed and slightly panicked by his bold declaration, but grateful for it nonetheless. We sat down.

Before long, others had wandered into the area and taken most of the seats around us. It was becoming a community. As the seats filled up, joints also began to wander their way around. The seat directly to my right was empty. At one point and more than once, the fellow sitting on the other side of that empty seat reached across to hand me a joint that I presume he got from whoever was on his right. I obliged by accepting it, taking a toke, and passing it on to Tom, who was sitting to my left. Tom did the same and then Mike. The process was repeated multiple times.

And that's pretty much how it went until a smartly attired usher approached with a rather straight-looking couple in tow and asked to see the tickets for the two sitting in front of us. When the two were unable to produce tickets, at least tickets for the seats they were in, the usher very diplomatically explained that the seats belonged to the couple she was escorting. The negotiations ended amicably; the two in the seats got up and left; the couple replaced them; the

usher went away, and we stayed where we were, exchanging anxious glances, and then another one of the joints that kept coming our way.

We were all getting stoned, but, each time an usher appeared, I for one stiffened my jaw and grated my teeth and immediately pondered our doom. At one point, the guy who had been passing me joints and his companion were accosted by an usher:

“Can I see your tickets, please?”

“Uh . . . didn’t keep the stubs.”

“I’m sorry, but these folks have tickets for these seats. I’m afraid you’ll have to move.”

“Right.”

And that was it. The two squatters left; the two with tickets stayed; the usher briefly looked around at the crowd, gave what looked like a shrug, and was gone. We exchanged more glances and more joints, this time coming from the two who had replaced the other two to my right.

Then another man and woman showed up in the row in front of us. They seemed a lot older than we were—maybe in their mid 20s—and the man crouched down and began to question a Mama Cass Elliottish-looking lady—also maybe in her mid 20s—who was sitting next to an empty seat. I couldn’t hear what was being said, but knew it was about tickets. The Mama Cass lady, however, didn’t budge, and the man, apparently accepting that the empty seat was all that they were going to get, straightened up gestured to his lady friend with the open palm of his hand to have a seat, which, after first rolling her eyes in disgust or disbelief, she did. He then squeezed down in the seat with her.

Soon after that incident, another older man and his lady friend were standing over me.

“You’ve got our seat,” he said rather menacingly. I turned to look at Mike and Tom, and moved to get up.

Before I could get out of my seat and bolt for the nearest exit, the Country Joe guy behind us shouted out to the man:

“Hey, man, what’s your seat number?”

“D16 and 17,” he replied, sounding a bit calmer and friendlier than before.

“Yeah, these are seats 6 and 7,” Country Joe continued. “I’m not shittin’ you. Your seats are way over on the other side.”

“Oh. Okay, man, thanks,” he said peaceably and turned, nudging his companion on the shoulder to turn her as well. And off they went to search for their real seats.

Turning around to acknowledge such a heroic gesture with a great big “thanks, man, you saved my bacon,” is what I should have said and done or something to that effect. My heart was racing. Terror, relief, panic, embarrassment were all spinning wildly inside of me. Instead, I didn’t say anything. I merely dropped my chin to my chest as a dog would drop its tail between its legs, and tried to slow my breathing.

Someone passed me a joint. I raised my head and took a toke, then passed it along. Had I known who Robert Browning was, I may have said when I exhaled, “All’s right with the world.”

Crisis averted, no one ever did sit in the seat to my right. After a few more minutes and no more interruptions from ushers or wayward ticketholders, the lights went low, the noise from the audience swelled, and a voice bellowed from the public address:

“Good evening. Now, Bayline proudly presents an evening with Led Zeppelin!”

In my altered state it sounded as though the announcer said, “Should you be leaving now, Bayline loudly presents, ‘Many think we’re Led Zepplin!’”

But it didn’t matter what I heard. The crowd, as you would expect, roared, the band took the stage, the music started, the joints kept coming. It was the greatest.

When we finally got back to the car, buzzing with euphoria and the effects of a lot of weed, glee, and a sense of the stupid luck we had just enjoyed, Mike took us to the next level.

“I don’t know about you guys, but I’m hungry,” he bragged, firing up the engine and setting off down the street.

We quickly put the Coliseum and the concert behind us. Mike was now on a quest for food; reality was settling in. Tom and I gave each other sympathetic looks, the kind that share in every detail the grimace of skewed, pursed lips, furrowed brows, and the momentary shifting of the eyes in no particular direction. Before either of us could say anything, Mike turned the car onto a side street and pulled up along the curb in front of a 24-hour Howard Johnson’s to make good on his boast. Our sympathies told us that he wasn’t treating, that we were going to be part of another audience, watching Mike eat.

“Over easy,” Mike said with a grin when the waitress asked how he’d like his eggs. He had ordered breakfast even though it was not quite yet midnight. She was a slender, older lady, tidy in her short-sleeved broad-collared white blouse and pink skirt wrapped in a tiny white apron with an oversized pocket for her pen and pad. Her hair was tidy, too, slightly graying, tied in braids atop her head and adorned by a drooping white tiara-like cap. Still scribbling a record of Mike’s order onto the pad she gripped tightly in her hand, she asked his two companions what they’d like. If she could only know what had just happened to them at the Coliseum: the rush, the waves, the crush of sound beating and reverberating and wafting like the smell of weed across a multitude of everything everywhere, the serendipity of it all.

She stopped writing, but did not look up, indifferently waiting to do what she was paid to do.

“Could we get some water?” is all we had to offer.