

The Diary of Bobby Steiner

Tour Tales from the New Millenium

by

William Traveler

This project is dedicated to the band Phish, the cars that somehow always got me to the shows on time- and to my fellow phans. The good, the bad, and the ugly- tour was some of the best times of my life.

It might not come as a surprise to learn this entire book was written while listening exclusively to the Phish show's referenced herein.



6/22/00-morning. Antioch/Nashville, TN. Miles Travelled: @280 miles- Total hours driving- 5. [REDACTED]

"In Which I Elucidate the Purpose of My Diary"

Wow. Starting is harder than I thought it would be. I'm not sure where to begin. Should I even be writing dumb shit like this down?

Probably not.

Okay, I'll just start at the beginning. No- that's an exaggeration. The beginning was 22 years ago and I can't honestly remember most of the early bits. I guess, in this case, the beginning would be telling you who I am. My name is Bobby Steiner. My friends call me Bobby Stoner- and they really shouldn't talk- they're as bad as I am.

This- as you've probably already figured out- is my diary. Well, it's not really much of a diary- right now it's just a single sheet of paper. I'm going to need to pick up a notebook somewhere.

I have arrived at the first stop in my itinerary and I'm buzzing with excitement- or I suppose that might be the four jumbo coffees I drank during the drive- but I don't think so. I'm only ten miles away from the venue now, and it seems like every car passing me is full of freaks. They smile and wave- and I smile and wave back- as a freak myself- its always exciting to see kinfolk.

This trip is my college graduation present to myself- 18 Phish shows in 25 days. I did mail order online for the entire tour and got tickets to almost every show. The only tickets I don't have are for the show in Canada (that I have no intention on seeing) and the second night in New Jersey (that I have every intention on seeing). My tickets are locked securely in my glove compartment and protected with the best mojo I could think of- a stack of ticket stubs from the 79 concerts I've already seen prior to this run.

So that's what I'm doing. I'm sure I'll write more about Phish and the whole tour scene as this goes along, but first I want to write down the story of why I started writing a diary/journal in the first place.

I'm writing this diary because of a man I met yesterday while I was still in Bloomington, home of Indiana University, the place I've called my home for the past several years. It was the middle of the afternoon and I was on my way to the grocery store to stock up on snacks and sundries for my Phish trip.

On the way, I was hungry (never go to a grocery store on an empty stomach!) and so I pulled into the parking lot of this little dump of a diner called Joe's Café. It was the kind of place where everything has a thin film of grease over it because the short order cooks have been frying stuff in the back kitchen for 40 years without any appreciable break or deep cleaning. Even the walls were yellow, though I suspect their condition had as much to do with the non-stop cigarette smoking as the grease. It was the kind of place where the food is to die for- they make no bones about anything being healthy- but what it lacks in low cholesterol it makes up for in deliciousness.

The quality of the grub was obvious from the fact I had to wait for a table at 11 in the morning. The usual gaggle of people milled about: a couple of families with their kids, an old guy with a battered leather face and a John Deere hat, a few students, and one other guy sitting by himself at the end of the long bench they kept by the door for patrons such as ourselves- who have yet to score a proper seat. The guy grabbed my attention as soon as I walked in. He was hunched over, his face only inches above the page as he furiously scratched something on a notepad sitting on his lap.

Curious, I ambled over toward him, trying not to be too obvious about what I was doing. Even from up close I couldn't read what he was writing- the script was cramped and probably illegible to anyone but the guy writing it. Finally, after a few minutes of watching him- he stopped writing and looked up.

I asked him what he was doing. He said, "I'm writing in my journal."

This really didn't tell me very much- so I asked him, "What are you writing in your journal?"

"It's private." He replied curtly.

Fair enough. It was a legitimate reply. Since he didn't want to be interrupted, I looked around to see if there was anyone else who might be a bit more receptive to a little conversation- thinking the old guy in

the John Deere hat might have a good story to tell about one thing or another.

Without a doubt, talking to strangers is one of my favorite things to do in the world. I love talking to people- I don't even really care what about- although I prefer when people tell me stories. True-false- a little bit of both- I don't really care. Although people who insist obviously false things are true tend to get on my nerves a bit.

If you think about it- the topics strangers choose to divulge are usually more interesting than the content of the specific information. There are people who talk about nothing- and some who will tell you crazy personal things out of the clear blue sky. I swear to god a girl at a show once told me she'd had four miscarriages in five years literally 10 seconds after I met her. It was like, "My name is Sally and I've lost four of my babies."

When I was a kid, I never would've considered going up to total strangers and speaking to them. I was really shy. It wasn't until I started smoking pot that I began to come out of my shell. I was a bit more sociable, but I still mostly kept to myself.

But then came the game changer. I was on 2 hits of some real nice Leary window pane blotter acid and I realized it was possible no one on the earth really existed- that they were all just my imagination.

Of course, this wasn't a novel idea, Descartes argues the same thing on his way to his very famous Cogito Ergo Sum (I think, therefore I am)- but I've always found the revelations I came to myself more valuable than ones I learn in a book.

For me, what sparked the idea were these preppy kids who were all drunk and acting like total fucking imbeciles. It just seemed logical to me at the time I must be making them up somehow. I mean, why would any *real* person want to act that way?

Now, before you go off thinking I'm some kind of nut-job, you should know, I am fully aware other people exist. I'm just saying it's possible they don't- and since it's possible everyone I see is just imaginary, I can walk up to them and have a chat, since I might be chatting with my own imagination. I suppose that sounds daft, but it's just one way using hallucinogens has helped me become a more sociable person.

I was about to get up and go to the bathroom when the guy with the journal all of a sudden decided he wanted to talk.

"Why do you want to know what I'm writing?" He asked- still kinda being a dick, but I was intrigued, so I sat back down.

"I don't know, you just looked really intent doing it- I was just wondering what you were getting on about."

"I'm writing about what a bitch my ex-wife is."

Internally I cringed- it was clearly a major misstep talking to this dude. I knew I was in for an earful of crap I probably didn't want to hear. Guys who are willing to start ripping on their exes to total strangers as a conversation starter are generally not coming from a happy place.

Twenty minutes later, I was choking down the last bite of a grilled cheese as fast as I could, while I listened to Frank call his poor ex-wife every nasty name ever conceived for the ladies. It was excruciating, but I invited this guy to talk, I felt like I needed to tough it out.

The only distraction came from my concerted effort to understand how my grilled cheese had become infused with the strong taste of trout. Frank was bumming me out, so I was doing my best to listen only well enough to allow me to know when to say "uh-huh."

But there was one thing he said that stuck out in my mind.

Frank said, "I write things down in my journal so that I can look back on what I'm feeling right now and remember. In a couple of years, when I'm stupid enough to let another woman into my heart, I'll go back and read this and I won't make the same mistake again."

For the sake of women everywhere, I hope he does. To me, the reason Frank wrote seemed stupid. But the idea behind it, to write down what was happening so I could look back on it later on, when I'm old and probably less cool (I hope not) and maybe remember what it was like to be 22 and on the road- just like Jack Kerouac in the Dharma Bums- that seemed like a fantastic idea.

And so this piece of paper is my attempt at capturing just a bit of what life is like on tour with the greatest rock band on earth in the first year of this new millennium. I think I'm going to write it as if I'm speaking to myself, then, when I'm like 75 and can barely remember what any of this crap meant or why- I can come back to this book and it'll be a bit like a time machine- assuming we haven't invented the real thing by the time I get that old (I boggle, everyday, that the Internet didn't really come into the public consciousness until 1992- just 8 short years ago- it's astonishing).



6/23/00- About 10:40 AM. Atlanta, GA. Miles Traveled: 530- Total hours driving- 9.5.

“Why on earth would anyone want to do something like that?”

Great show last night!!! I am so glad I did this.

For today's entry I thought I would write about how I came to this adventure. On the day of my graduation my ever so proud parents took me out to my favorite restaurant in Bloomington and handed me an envelope. Inside was a card and a check for a grip of money. The card had a picture of the world on it and they said they wanted me to use the money to travel- go to Europe or Asia and see some of the world.

Problem was- I didn't want to go to Europe. Well, that's not really true- I do want to go to Europe, but as soon as I saw the check I knew exactly what I was going to do- I was going to go on a full leg of Phish tour. I've seen 4-5 shows in a row every year since 1994, usually 2 or 3 times a year- but I've never been able to do a whole tour from start to finish. With that single check, my dream became a possibility.

Of course I had a few doubts and a regret or two. I've wanted to go to Amsterdam since I smoked my first joint seven years ago and there was definitely part of me interested in taking the trip. But after last night's concert- I'm absolutely certain I made the right decision.

It was the first show of the tour and it was full of special guests including Bluegrass legend Del McCourey- so that was really cool to see. After the show I jumped in the car and drove the four and a half hours straight to Atlanta- they're playing two nights here so I want to get a hotel as close to the Lakewood Amphitheatre as possible.

So that's how I came to be on tour, but the question still remains- why am I on tour? I thought for the rest of this entry I'd talk about tour in general. First of all, the experience of seeing Phish is completely

different when you're seeing a string of shows. While the crowds are huge, there are maybe 10,000 people who are actually following along from show to show and you quickly begin to see them from one town to the next. The longest string of shows I've done prior to this was 7- and even then I came to know a dozen people by sight alone.

The people on tour fall into two general categories*, the alternative entrepreneurs, and the tour rats. I tend to hang around the alternative entrepreneurs because the tour rats have a tendency to steal your clean socks and try to mooch into your hotel room without throwing in money or even a few bowls of weed in exchange.

Whenever I'm trying to explain to people why I spend so much time and energy following Phish, I always give them the same answer. Phish Shows are the way America is supposed to be. It is the America you read about in the brochures. Life on tour is a mobile community where a guy can do his own thing in total freedom so long no one is getting hurt and you're smart enough to keep away from the limited, but always diligent police. It's the kind of place where people- total strangers- will actually help you if you need it- the kind of place where even the dirtiest, smelliest hippy can find a ride to the next town.

Sure there's assholes here. The universe is full of them. It's not a utopia, and things aren't perfect. People get ripped off, strung out, and wasted in the worst possible way- which reminds me about a rumor I've been hearing lately. One I refuse to allow myself to believe- that Trey Anastasio, the lead guitarist- has suddenly started smoking heroin- maybe even injecting it. I heard it from a guy I know who regularly goes out into the crowd and buys weed and the occasional mushrooms, not just for the band, but for the backstage party in general. He told me last night, in a conspiratorially harsh tone, that Trey had suddenly started asking for balloons of heroin along with the normal stuff- not a good time.

The music has been fantastic so far so I don't even want to contemplate the idea the rumor could be true. Before I discovered Phish I, like many other people on tour, saw as many Grateful Dead shows as I could convince my Mom to let me see. Jerry Garcia's death in 1993 is attributed directly to health complications arising from his heroin use- so until he gets busted or otherwise admits it publicly, I'm going to assume Trey is just doing the smart drugs and avoiding the stupid ones. To my definition, smart drugs are weed and psychedelics- shit that expands your mind or makes you a calmer, more empathetic person.

* If I wanted, I could probably identify 1000 categories, but generically, there are 2.

Stupid drugs are cocaine, heroin, the sorry ass fake bullshit that passes for Ecstasy these days and of course, pills.

I've met plenty of simple minded people who say all drugs are the same and all equally bad. Their caffeine and alcohol use is somehow given a moral pass because the caffeine and alcohol industries have better PR people. I think this opinion is not only scientifically inaccurate- its just plain old fashioned fucking stupid. In my experience, the key to drug use is moderation, and having an intellect sufficient enough to deal with what the drugs deal you.

Far too many people think the whole point of going on tour with a band is to get wasted and do drugs. And I'm not going to deny to myself this isn't really a factor for a lot of people. But certainly not all. For many of us, myself included, the music is what matters. If they could somehow ban drugs completely from concerts- I'd still be here.

I think I've discovered the heart of what it is I love so much about this scene. It probably seems trivial, but to me, it's the nougat center in the middle of the Phish candy. The band holds quasi-annual "festivals" where they pick a place out in the middle of nowhere (upstate New York, upstate Maine, the swamp in Florida) and play 3 sets a day for 2 or three days. I've been to all of these large festivals and I just noticed this detail at the Lemonwheel- the big party of 1998.

At every concert I've ever been to- the guys working for the show wore shirts that were emblazoned with the phrase "SECURITY." At the Lemonwheel- these same shirts said, "SAFETY."

See, I told you it didn't seem like a very big deal. But it is. Just by changing this one word- the people who are supposed to be at the show to keep any scary stuff that might come up from happening- are there to help you- to keep you safe.

Not secure, safe. If something is "secured" its strapped down, held tightly, constricted, controlled and thoroughly squared away. In other words, secure things, are fascist things.

Safety, on the other hand, is so much softer. I can be totally safe just about anywhere. Safe doesn't assume the other guy is there to stick a knife in your back. Safe assumes that you've taken reasonable precautions not to physically harm oneself or others. Safe still assumes assistance if the darkness does come knocking on your doorstep- but such things aren't central. Safety assumes most people can take care of themselves and can do so not to your detriment. And I know these things are true and possible not because I think so, but because I've seen

it. It was like 104 degrees in the shade last year at the two day festival in Oswego New York and everyone worked together and looked after one another, kids who'd brought water to sell were just handing it out to people who didn't have any. People with good cars set up little air conditioning tents that 5 or 6 people would cram into for some hint of respite from the heat.

I think everyone at these shows is more interested in being safe, than being secure. And for once, for those moments, our culture, our government, such as it is, is aligned with our own intentions and beliefs. Maybe to most people that isn't important. But to me, it's the greatest part about America, that this can happen here, that we are as free as we are.

LATER

I just re-read my little screed above and I realized I barely talked about why I'm not just following the scene of this band, I'm following THIS band.

So why do I love Phish? It's hard to explain- but let me start with an example.

I think the guys in the band knew they had to do something spectacular to take them into the new century. I first started hearing rumors as early as march of last year (1999) they were going to throw the biggest party ever- somewhere in the south. Then they announced the Japan trip and everyone was thinking they were going to be like the Grateful Dead who went to Egypt to play the pyramids- except with Phish they'd play the top of some mountain in Japan. But after endless weeks spent wildly theorizing on Phish.net, the announcement finally came- they were going to play... the middle of the fucking everglades... on an Indian Reservation.

For me, Big Cypress Indian Reservation became the one and only place I would even consider spending my New Year's Eve. But for the girl I was dating, it wasn't her first choice. Believe it or not, we broke up over that concert. I bought tickets for both of us, but the night before we were supposed to leave she told me she wasn't going.

So I went alone, and we broke up as a result, and although it may make me sound like an asshole, I haven't regretted my decision to go for a single second. And since I didn't write them down at the time, I want to record the four things about Big Cypress I remember best.

- The sun rising on a new century standing in the middle of that huge field- everyone looking so tired, yet so hopeful.
- That random, beautiful girl who kissed me at midnight.
- Hiking 3 miles into the show with all of my shit on my back and those nice people who gave me a glass of water and a big fat bowl of nugs to help me on my journey.
- The alligators I stopped and watched on the ride home and my thoughts about those prehistoric creatures and our current state of affairs.

That was 6 months ago now, and I'm just as happy about this decision as I was with that one. Just as a for instance, take tonight's show. They play two sets and the second set proceeded as follows:

They opened with "Jesus Just Left Chicago" (a Blues Standard) played it into "Down with Disease" then they went into "Twist Around" from their new album. To be clear- they started playing "Jesus left Chicago" and created a musical bridge from it to "Disease" and then into "Twist" without stopping for even a moment- I suppose if you didn't know they were different songs, you could think it was all just one enormous song- that's how slickly they move from song to song. After that, they paused briefly and didn't stop again until the end of the second set- "Contact" into "Makisupa Policeman" --DANK!-- into the now standard closer "Character Zero." They played for almost an hour and a half and they only stopped once. That's not just genius- that's the universe expressing itself musically. These guys are conversing with their instruments, they're not just playing. Each instrumental excursion in the midst of a song sees the band playing games, challenging each other, and forcing themselves to leap off of the cliff of improvisation over and over with stunningly consistent results. The best baseball stars bat .300, Phish bats like .970.

Wanted to say more about the band but I gotta cut it short- I'm going to a party being thrown by the best friends of the people next to my tent in the yard of a house near the venue. A lot of the things that happen here are like that- I got my last bag of weed via a guy I met two summers ago- his cousin was also at the show and after walking from one end of the parking lot to the other we finally found him- and then he had to find this one specific girl he'd bought from when they first arrived. It took two hours and talking to like 20 people, but I eventually got my

grubby paws on some fantastic stuff. Nothing here is linear and time flows much more slowly when you have nothing really to do but hang out until the show starts- its what I love about doing this- it alters your very perception of time- what else could you ask for in a vacation?