

Excerpt from "Our Lady of the Open Road"

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Nebula Award Winner, Best Novelette

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On a good night like this, when we locked in with each other, it was like I was a time traveler for an hour. Every night we'd ever played a song overlapped with every night we'd ever play it again, even though I was fully in the moment. My fingers made shapes, ran steel strings over magnets, ran signals through wires to the amplifier behind me, which blasted those shapes back over me in waves. Glorious, cathartic, bone-deep noise.

On stage, I forgot how long I'd been doing this. I could still be the kid playing in her parents' basement, or the young woman with the hit single and the major label, the one called the next Joan Jett, the second coming of

riot grrl, not that I wanted to be the young version of me anymore. I had to work to remember that if I slid on my knees I might not get up again. I was a better guitar player now, a better singer, a better songwriter. I had years of righteous rage to channel. When I talked, I sometimes felt like a pissed off grump, stuck in the past. Given time to express it all in music, I came across better.

The women of Moby K. Dick pushed through to the front when we played "Manifest Independence," singing along at the top of their lungs. They must have been babies when I released that song, but it might as well have been written for them. It was as true for them as it had been for me.

That was what the young punks and the old punks all responded to; they knew I believed what I was singing. We all shared the same indignation that we were losing everything that made us distinct, that nothing special happened anymore, that the new world replacing the old one wasn't nearly as good, that everyone was hungry and everything was broken and that we'd fix it if we could find the right tools. My job was to give it all a voice. Add to that the sweet old-school crunch of my Les Paul played through Marshall tubes, Silva's sinuous bass lines, Jacky's tricky beats, and we could be the best live band you ever

heard. Made sweeter by the fact that you had to be there to get the full effect.

We didn't have rehearsed moves or light shows or spotlights to hit like the StageHolos, but we knew how to play it up for the crowd. To make it seem like we were playing for one person, and playing for all of them, and playing just for them, because this night was different and would only ever happen once. People danced and pogoed and leaned into the music. A few of the dancers had ultraviolet tattoos, which always looked pretty awesome from my vantage point, a secret performance for the performers. I nudged Silva to look at one of them, a glowing phoenix spread wingtip to wingtip across a dancer's bare shoulders and arms.

A couple of tiny screens also lit the audience: people recording us with Bracertabs, arms held aloft. I was fine with that. Everyone at the show knew how it felt to be there; they'd come back, as long as there were places for us to play. The only market for a non-Holo recording was other people like this audience, and it would only inspire them to come out again the next time.

Toward the end of the set, I dedicated "Our Lady of the Open Road" to our van. At the tail of the last chorus, Jacky rolled through his toms in a way he never had before,

cracking the song open wide, making it clear he wasn't coming in for a landing where he was supposed to. Silva and I exchanged glances, a wordless "this is going to be interesting," then followed Jacky's lead. The only way to do that was to make it bigger than usual, keep it going, make it a monster. I punched my gain pedal and turned to my amp to ride the feedback. Our lady of the open road, get me through another night.

Through some miracle of communication we managed to end the song together, clean enough that it sounded planned. I'd kill Jacky later, but at that moment I loved him. The crowd screamed.

I wiped the sweat out of my eyes with my shoulder. "We've got one more for you. Thanks so much for being here tonight." I hoped "Better to Laugh" wouldn't sound like an afterthought.

That was when the power went out.

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