

So You Wanna Be A Roadie?

The boy had already been called for lunch three times. Each time the door was opened, deafening heavy metal music blasted through the rest of the house like a fireball. Finally he appeared in his teenage splendour, all dressed in black with studs and piercings. He seated himself among the adults with a scowl. He didn't contribute to the conversation unless addressed directly.

"What are you planning to do when you leave school?" the woman next to him asked at one stage.

"I wanna be a roadie", he replied. There was silence for a moment as everyone digested this. He looked pleased with the lack of reaction.

"I was a humper for a while" said one of the men at the table.

"A what?" said the boy.

"A humper. It's another name for a roadie. It's what we called ourselves."

"Why?"

"Because the whole job consisted of humping huge boxes around - from big trucks onto stages and then from stages into big trucks."

"Which band did you work for?" asked the boy.

"I didn't work for a band, I worked for the production company that staged the concerts - most roadies do."

"But don't bands have their own roadies?"

"Yeah, they do," the man said, "but you should get something clear right away - there are roadies and there are roadies. Bands have their own roadies - usually somebody's brother or best mate - who are trusted workers that travel with the band and form part of the "family" along with the musicians themselves, their managers, the technicians, etc. But the vast majority of roadies are employed by the production company like I was, and they're as low as low can be - they don't travel with the band, and they aren't allowed to do anything except for hump huge boxes around".

The boy wasn't going to let this put him off.

"What about girls? Roadies get the girls that hang around."

"The roadies are busy humping huge boxes at the concert venue before the girls have even started putting on their make-up. Then they're frantically busy with last minute preparations when they arrive, and busy humping huge boxes for many hours after they've gone off home."

"But you could get them free tickets."

"The roadie's the bottom of the pile, remember, and the last person who gets given free tickets, or anything else that might be likely to act as romantic bait. The closest I ever saw to a roadie pulling a girl, was this poor guy who met a groupie outside the venue on his way in. He chatted her up and claimed that if she met him at the arranged time at such and such a gate, he could get her in and they could see the concert together. The stupid guy then bribed a security guard more money than a ticket would have cost to allow him to bring the girl in. The guard said that he was finishing work then, so the guy had to be right on time. When the guy arrived, the guard let the girl in the gate, shoved the roadie out of the way and disappeared into the crowd with the girl."

The boy was still not convinced.

"But you must get to meet the rock stars."

The man laughed. "If a roadie (or anyone else of the male sex) who's not actually in the process of humping a huge box comes within a stone's throw of a rock star then that rock star's bodyguards will appear out of nowhere."

"And they're pretty tough, right?"

"Yeah, they come in two basic types. There's the gorilla, whose head grows directly out of his shoulders without the inconvenience of a neck, and whose arms are as thick as a normal man's thighs. And then there's the martial artist, who is much smaller but has a way of carrying himself and a sort of electrical aura that lets everybody know that he likes breaking bricks with his hands before breakfast and would just as soon break their neck as look at them. Anyway, either kind is more than enough reason for roadies not to meet the rock stars."

"So you never met anyone?" the boy asked, starting to look a bit fazed.

"The closest I ever came was when I was doing the Rolling Stones at Wembley. That time I was on the "ambience crew", whose job it was to make sure everything was in order in the band's dressing rooms and leisure area before they arrived, clear right out while they were there, and then clean up the mess afterwards. I clearly remember the limos drawing up as we stood well back to see the arrival of the stars. The door of the first one opened and Mick Jagger got out. He looked in my direction and then began striding towards me, a big smile on his face. I panicked! "What am I going to say to him?" I thought. Of course, he walked straight up to the

woman standing next to me, kissed her, spoke a few words and then walked away. His bodyguards scowled at me anyway."

The boy refused to give in.

"But everyone involved in the rock music scene gets paid a lot of money - there's that at least."

"Roadies get paid a pittance! When you do a really big gig - one that involves days to set up - then you end up with quite a lot of money in your pocket, for the simple reason that you work so many hours and don't really have time to spend any of it. I can't remember how much we got paid per hour, but to give you an indication of how much we earned, I did one concert at Wembley (I can't remember who was playing now) which finished late, and by the time we'd cleared up afterwards it was 4 or 5 in the morning. We walked home to south London! It must have been about 20 miles! And you know why we walked? Because we worked out that if we'd caught a taxi then we would have spent nearly all the money we'd earned that night! That's how well roadies get paid!"

But the boy just wouldn't let go.

"What about drugs? Everyone knows that there's drugs everywhere in the music scene." The man looked across at the boy's father, who raised his eyebrows in a gesture that said "It's OK. The boy doesn't do drugs. He's just showing off now".

"Well, I'd be lying if I claimed there were no drugs around the scene of rock concerts." said the man, "There were always shady individuals who seemed to be allowed to come and go as they pleased without any authorisation. But drugs aren't free - they cost the same high price for roadies as they do for anyone else, and as I've already said, roadies don't earn good money. It's true that some of the guys used them to keep awake so that they could work longer and earn more money, but that's just stupid. Guys on drugs are a liability - you don't want to be humping one end of a huge box when some strung out guy absent-mindedly drops the other end. The foremen sacked anyone they caught."

The boy was looking a bit disgruntled.

"But it can't be all bad, surely", he said.

"Well, no, you do get to see all the concerts for free." the man replied.

"But didn't you ever do anything weird or wonderful? Something that you wouldn't have had a chance to do otherwise?"

"Well ... yeah, I once telephoned my mother from Mick Jagger's dressing room"

"Really? What did she say?" the boy's father interjected.

"She asked me if he was there", the man replied.

"And was he?"

"Of course not! If he'd been there then I wouldn't have!"

"Who wasn't there?" asked the boy.

"Mick Jagger"

"Oh, right, you mentioned him before - who's he?"

The man said no more. The boy looked pleased with himself, like he'd just scored some points. No granddad's tales were going to convince him what he should or shouldn't do. He'd be a roadie if he wanted to. Or maybe he wouldn't be a roadie. Maybe he'd be a rock star instead.

THE END