

Chuck Howard, 1969

by Hal Bynum (Aug. 2006)

Chuck was lounging back in the swivel chair, his feet on Bobby Bobo's desk talking to Jim Kandy, "Son! You're the coldest mule I've ever tried to ride! What have you done to people in this town? They're all scared to death of you!"

Kandy chuckled happily, "I know it." He was stocky, balding and had a bright, intelligent look about him and had great, effortless presence. He sat very erect in the straight-backed chair cradling a motorcycle helmet under his right arm as though he were at parade rest in a police academy inspection, proud to serve and ready to die for the cause if necessary,

Hal studied him carefully. He seemed to be doing a parody on some type of individual that Hal was not familiar with. There was a joyful, wry cynicism about him and something down deep that constantly said, 'I don't give a damn, and as a consequence, I'm having a wonderful time. Life is a joke and I'm rising to the occasion,' or something like that. Hal liked him immediately.

Chuck was enjoying playing the role of the big executive about to fire an employee who has failed to fill the bill. He had cut a demo on Kandy and taken it to several record companies asking them for a budget so he could cut a big session that would adequately display Kandy's beautiful voice.

Chuck was digging vanilla wafers out of a box, chewing and talking with his mouth full. He was a diabetic. He shook his head sadly, "They all listened and nodded and listened and nodded and when the tape was finished, they all looked at me and said the same thing, 'How's the boy's mind?'"

Chuck's eyes wandered around the ceiling as though he were an electrical inspector about to condemn the wiring.

"How's the boy's mind?" He dug out a cookie and held it away from him, examining it from all angles. He suddenly dropped the wafer, lunged out of the chair, placed his palms on the desk and thrust his face toward Kandy, shouting, "How is your mind?!"

Everyone in the room roared with laughter. The acting and the timing were superb. Kandy beamed, he loved it.

Chuck lay back in the chair and laughed, "How's the boy's mind?"

When he had milked all the laughter there was going to be, he turned serious, "I'm gonna do it with my own money. Some people owe me, and some others I'll promise to pay 'em and never do it. Probably give the studio a hot check. It'll all work out." He pointed to Hal, "I want you to cut this boy's song. It's a great song. We'll do it instead of that dog of mine." He shook his head looking puzzled, "Now I'm knocking my own songs off the session. I must be going crazy. How's the boy's mind?"

Chuck picked Hal up in the afternoon before the night session. When Hal got in the Cadillac, Chuck roared off, beginning to talk without any greetings.

"I called you early so we could stop by on the way and watch my boys play baseball. Chuckie's pitching and I ..."

"Baseball! Watch kids play baseball? Why in the hell -- I could have rode with somebody else-- why didn' you--"

"Cousin! Think what I'm doin' for you!" He was wearing a pale grey, three-piece suit identical to his powder blue one. He was waving his right hand as he drove, turning on the charm. "The little warrior does it again! Discovers starving unknown writer, hand-carries him to the very portals, I said the very portals of--"

"Chuck! I don't want to set and watch a goddamn ball game! I'm nervous as a son of a bitch. I been comin' off booze and I--" The tires squealed as Chuck whipped the car onto the freeway.

"Portals-- I just got that word out of a book, portals," he roared on, deftly blocking Hal. "You know you need to teach me all those words you know. I never got to go to school. I need to know words. Reach out! Help the little diabetic! You could--would you look at that son of a bitch!" He passed a truck on the wrong side.

"Damn, Chuck!" The truck driver hit his air horn and Hal glanced around in time to see him shaking his fist.

"No sense of humor! The man's got absolutely no sense of humor. Ain't you glad we don't have to be around him all the time?" He reached out and gently gripped Hal's arm. Hal was still bracing himself against the dashboard. "Son, I tell you what, I'll stop and get you some beer, okay? Then you can settle down. A beautiful afternoon, a couple of beers and a ball game, now I ask you, what could be better? Then we'll roll on out to the barn and cut that old dog song of yours, alright?"

Hal remembered them stopping at a liquor store to buy a fifth of 180 proof grain alcohol, then stopping at a grocery store for cups and several bottles of Sprite. He remembered drinking and hollering and laughing with Chuck as they sat on some wooden bleachers and then he remembered nothing at all, no recording session, no ride home afterward, nothing. The first thing he knew it was early morning and he was lying on the bathroom floor, naked and sick.

Hal was sitting on the porch of the Clubhouse in the afternoon sunshine waiting for the new owner to open for business, when Chuck saw him, wheeled over and stopped. He got out of the car and walked slowly up the sidewalk. He sat down across the porch from Hal, staring thoughtfully and saying nothing. He had on the powder blue suit again.

Someone passed on the sidewalk and hollered, "Hi Chuck!" but Chuck gave no indication he heard, continuing to stare at Hal. When he finally spoke, his voice was tired.

"Well son, I guess you know what you've done to yourself in this town." Hal kept his face expressionless, but the bottom dropped out of his stomach. "Do you remember any of it?" His voice was cold. Hal shook his head, the tiniest of movements.

Chuck dropped his gaze to the floor of the porch, ran his hand through his thick brown curls and shook his head sadly, "My guess is, you're through in this town. A bunch of those musicians are producers. They were doing it for me as a favor."

He looked up at Hal again, his face deadly serious, "Everywhere I've been

today people were talking about it.”

Hal’s stomach was in such a knot he could hardly breathe. He kept his face impassive.

“You don’t remember any of it?”

Hal didn’t respond. He couldn’t go back to Fort Worth, nor Albuquerque either.

“It was the worst thing I’ve ever seen in this town.” Chuck looked down the street and far into the distance, his hands resting on his knees.

“An I’ve seen a lot in this town, believe me.” When Hal still didn’t respond he continued, speaking softly, “At first people thought it was funny. If I could have got you in the car at that point—” his voice trailed off.

“The third time you kicked over Walter Hayne’s guitar, you were through at Decca. George Richey was on piano, so you’re through at Columbia.” Chuck was opening and closing his hand slowly, staring at it as though he didn’t know it would do that. “When you grabbed that little background singer, I thought her husband was going to hit you with a mike stand. It took four men to put you in the car and right in the middle of the next cut, you came bustin’ in wantin’ to fight everybody. You don’t remember any of that?” When Hal didn’t answer, Chuck stood up. For the first time Hal noticed how small he was. “You cost me between three and four grand. The tape’s worthless.” He turned and started down the steps, then stopped. He twisted his head slowly and looked back at Hal, “But that’s not the worst part. The worst part is — I lost a friend.” Hal didn’t turn his head to watch him, but he heard the car door close and heard Chuck drive slowly away.

After a while the man came and unlocked the front door, but Hal didn’t hear him. He was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, staring at the concrete.

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