

Sweet Benny and the Sanchez Penitentiary Band

by BH Shepherd

It's a Thursday night and Sue's is packed. Old buddies are trading dirty stories over pitchers at the top of their lungs and the barbacks are earning their tips—been shaking out fruity martinis since eight-thirty. The dance floor, the dark corner where the tables are pushed back, is crowded with necking kids and single girls in miniskirts sending out the signal. Jukebox hasn't worked since I got here in '72, so half the floor is taken up by some college band murdering the memory of a blues musician nobody ever gave a fuck about.

It didn't used to be like this; one time Sue's was a whiskey and beer hole. If you were on the other side of my bar, it was a while since you had friends to drink with. I was just another one of those bums when Big Earl died and left me the place in '86. He was a professional alcoholic, so I guess you could say he died on duty, which is as honorable a thing as a man could hope for. He always used to say that sometimes in life it's hard for a man to hold his head up and keep on walking, and if he's walking through El Paso, he stops at Sue's for a drink. Everyone in Sue's had a story about those times; it was that time for me when I started working here, and it was that way until just a few months ago. A few months ago I never knew margaritas came in strawberry, and Thursday night was slower than the last highway out of Hanoi. But all that changed when I met this young con name of Sweet Benny.

Sue's had many regulars, some more like furniture than customers, but Benny was the closest thing I ever had to a favorite. The yat-spittin' son of a bitch first swaggered in here not even a year ago, dressed in a boot-marked and blood-stained blue tuxedo. He ordered a beer and asked me for work before I was even done pouring. I told him the first round was on me, but he best look elsewhere for that job. Whistler's Place over on San Jacinto used to hire boys fresh out of Sanchez because they would drink their wages, but then every night the bar was full of hammered ex-cons. One rowdy weekend the place burned to the ground, Whistler turned up missing, and nobody asked any questions because we didn't have any. Sanchez was like an asshole factory built on Hell's own oasis in the desert, distilling men into the most vile and ruthless bastards ever to roam Texas. Benny seemed harmless enough, a skinny little mulatto with a voice as light as his skin, but I'd seen Sanchez do worse with less.

It took him the better part of a week to drink through his gate money, and after that he just hung on to the end of the bar like it was the last thing floating on a sinking ship. See, Benny was one of those drunks who's your best friend, full of dirty stories about seducing rich white ladies and then ripping them off, leaving them naked and broke. His stories always ended with "But I ain' shawmin' none no mo'," and his jagged grin would sag until someone bought him a drink. But it wasn't long before Benny ran out of stories and the bar ran out of generosity.

When he asked me if he could trade me anything for drinks and I said "Money," I knew that wasn't what Sweet Benny had in mind. He couldn't have been older than twenty, but he talked like he'd been selling cars for thirty years. Everything he said made you want to keep talking to him; he'd draw you into his story by asking what you thought about it, and before you knew it you actually cared about what happened. All his

questions had the force of statements. He was completely full of shit, but Benny's main selling point was that there was no car. I had no idea what he was pushing, and the only way to find out was to buy it.

A week later this jig was back with a whole band of one-note losers, saying they'd play for free drinks. I said they could have the first round free and have to earn the rest. He promised me they'd play more than drink, and I said this way I'd know for sure. I was assured that would be no problem, no problem at all, and Benny scurried back to warming up his "band." Benny was singing, backed up by a big old nigger name of Bo Ghost on bass; reckon he got the name because he was blind as a bat and twice as black—when he sat in that dark corner all you saw were two hollow grey eyes floating above a shock of white beard. He wasn't much on talking, that was pretty much Benny's department, but after every set he drank like his next stop was the morgue, and left before it showed any effect on him. Somehow I learned that Ghost was actually Benny's cousin, and so I asked one night if everything his relation sang about was true, and he replied in a voice so soft I could have slept on it: "Benny is a fine storyteller. He never lets the truth get in the way of a good story." And when I asked what Benny really went away for, he just chuckled and asked what he told me. I had to take it all with a bag of salt, because Ghost didn't look like he'd been out long either - but I didn't want Benny's hard-luck tale to be a half-truth.

Playing guitar was some kid they called Zig Zag, his handle inspired by the jagged black tats that sleeved his wiry arms and curled around his throat. He always placed his guitar in a chair next to him like a lady, and his eyes were always shut when he strummed her. During the week I always saw that drag rat playing his guitar out by the highway, or on the corner by Salado's place tweaked on some lab junk, wearing a cardboard sign that read FAMILY SLAIN BY NINJAS. NEED \$\$ FOR KARATE LESSONS—GOD BLESS. He'd stumble into Sue's about an hour after the rest of the band finished warming up, twitchin' and itchy, talking so fast he forgot his words and barely able to hold his head straight. Double Beam could usually put his feet back on Earth, but he stopped taking them because he always played his best when he was coming down the hardest. That's what he told me, whatever the fuck it meant. For a few hours every Thursday and Friday night, Zig was a genius, but you could always read the junk in his eyes, cracked and stained like church glass.

There was also a shadow-faced cowboy in a straw hat called Dodge, though he never introduced himself—real strong and silent type, but he could make a harmonica cry. They even got Pedro, the kid I'd been paying a dollar an hour for the last six months, to play drums and haul all their gear around in his van for nothing. Turns out his name was Vijo; I didn't ask where they got the gear. The band always warmed up with blues tunes, and then the show was mostly BB King and Johnny Cash covers, but Benny always traded Folsom for Sanchez. It wasn't bad. No overnight success, but there were no fights and nothing burned down. It was a good night. And just like that one good night lead to another. My patrons had friends, and before long some even had women, and they all came to Sue's to shake it to the sounds of Sweet Benny Pace and his Sanchez Penitentiary Band.

They didn't come up with the name, but it's catchy, ain't it? Wish I could take the credit, but it was actually some kid named Tucker or Chad who first gave them ink in a community college newspaper—within a week Sue's was crawling with students and

wannabe musicians who just couldn't wait to hear a bunch of ex-cons hammer out a fourteen-minute Freebird at last call on a Friday night. For the city bitches that come out here to slum it, it was just a way to blow off some steam, an end to their week. But Benny and his boys from inside played from pain; you could tell they didn't have much else going on but singing for their booze. If it weren't for Sue's, I doubt Zig Zag would bother crawling out of his gutter.

On the night they were "discovered," Zig unplugged as soon as he finished his last note, shaking like a drug store pony, but Benny grabbed him by the arm because the crowd was still clapping, and if the crowd ain't gonna stop, why should the band?

"Gimme some sad da singduh, Zig," he slurred. "Make the ladies cry." An original encore by Sweet Benny was a rare thing, but only because none of them were ever worth repeating. Nothing but clever country rhymes about selling dope on Bourbon Street and dirty little tunes about stealing from women he seduced. But that night he did a little ditty with a chorus of "Goodnight Sally," about the one girl that was so pretty he just couldn't rip her off, and so he slips out the window empty-handed and heartbroken. Now, no one who knew Benny longer than ten minutes believed this story, but that didn't stop him from getting laid every time he sang it. It was the song that was going to make them famous, because the bright-eyed journalism student on the beat couldn't get two words from anyone but Benny.

Like I said, Ghost weren't much on talking, Dodge never said anything but "whiskey, straight," and Vijo didn't even speak English. That left Benny and Zig Zag, who was already itching to get somewhere. The dumb kid went for the guitarist interview, trying for that A+ no doubt, and walked right up into his face and just started spitting questions at him. Zig Zag didn't even break his stride as he grabbed the nearest mug and smashed it over the kid's head. The dumb kid crumpled to the floor, bleeding and cursing and that just made Zig even madder. He kicked him over onto his back and started to go to work on his face with a piece of broken glass, but big Bo Ghost pulled them apart like a teacher in a schoolyard.

"Easy friend," said Ghost.

Benny carried the poor kid off to the commode to lick his wounds while Zig Zag stood there staring daggers, his hand still gripping glass. "Go take a nap, Grandpa," he snapped. "This ain't between me and you."

"No, it ain't," Ghost replied calmly. "I am between you and him." That pretty much settled it. Zig may have only had a pile of ash for a brain, but he could still see that Bo Ghost was easily five times his size; the guy had to duck his head just to stand up inside.

I put his cut on the counter and watched him stuff it in his tattered camo pocket without even a count. He slung that axe over his shoulder like a shotgun and hustled out the door hissing fuck all this noise, he had shit to do. Once Zig went slinking off to his alley to burn, Sweet Benny spent the rest of the night giving the young journalist an earful. He was all smooth-talk and smiles, telling tall tales about living by the sweat of his hustle and his big music ambitions. Benny made himself out to be a real penitentiary poet and the kid ate it all up, taking notes like he thought there was going to be a quiz. That article goes to press and suddenly a week later I'm not doing them a favor anymore—Sweet Benny is actually putting money *in* the register.

One night near closing, after Zig and Vijo had disappeared to their respective nowheres and Benny had left to touch a few co-ed souls with his poetry, I shared a few shots with Bo Ghost, just to finish the bottle. I forget how it came about, but he told me Benny was his cousin from Zana, that they had strayed a bit, but were trying to play their way back, do their part.

“Benny’s no problem,” I told him, “but that Zig Zag should be on a leash. Can’t keep him around the children.”

Old Ghost was the picture of seriousness when he replied, “Just because I did not wish to see that boy die does not make me his keeper. I’m just here to play.”

“Way he handles that ax I might think about keepin’ him. Am I right, cowboy?” I passed the question down to Dodge, who sat at the end of the bar with the other regulars—silent, smoking islands of men.

“A man don’t know better than to shit where he eats is just a dog,” he replied.

Bo Ghost stood up kind of quick to that. “What did you call me?” he asked.

Dodge didn’t look up from his glass as he replied, “I said it loud.”

There was a tense moment, like that whistle just before a mortar hits and you’re waiting for a whole piñata of blood, guts and fire—but this shell was a dud. Ghost grabbed his money and stormed out the door, and the only conversation I got out of Dodge the rest of the night was “whiskey, straight.” They weren’t exactly friends, all the players of the Sanchez Penitentiary Band. If you didn’t see them on stage, you would’ve never guessed they even knew each other, but when they played it was like they’d been on the road for years, cracking jokes and beers between songs. The band’s drink jar sat on top of the old jukebox, and would fill up with singles as folks made requests. After that article, they started having a little more left over at the end of the night. But I never saw Benny handing it out. They all tended to go their separate ways after the show, except for Dodge—he never missed a last call.

“You ever go home, cowboy?” I asked him.

He passed a dry glass back to me and muttered, “whiskey, straight,” but the bottle was as empty as the bar, one last sliver of amber.

“Time to call it a night,” I said. “Go get some sleep.”

“Ain’t tired.” He grabbed the bottle off the counter and downed what was left. That’s when the phone started to clang like a fire alarm. I knew it meant trouble, this midnight call. I’d owned Sue’s for thirty years and this was the first time I ever heard the phone ring. On the other end was a Miss Veronica Featherstone with the ACL Office and she wanted to confirm the venue, but I didn’t know what the fuck that was. She huffed impatiently and asked if the Sanchez Penitentiary Band was playing here tomorrow night and I said sure, why not? After she hung up I asked Dodge if he knew Miss Featherstone.

“Nope.” The door slammed shut behind him.

That Friday night Benny showed up looking shiny, smiling and shaking hands with his band like they just won a ballgame. He bought a round for the house, made an enthusiastic toast no one could understand, and only got more excited as the college kids started to filter in early. Vijo had to help me serve beer ‘til showtime I was getting so backed up. When I finally got two words with Benny they didn’t make any sense; he just shoved a folded up flyer in my shirt pocket and said, “Alla bess, m’mayun. Is owl happnin.”

In between pours I was keeping an eye out for this Miss Featherstone, but tonight it was like trying to find a drunk in an El Paso alley—the place was packed with dolled-up chicks, and she coulda been all or none of them, far as I knew. But it didn't matter, because she never got a chance to hear the band play. Soon as Bo Ghost struck that deep blue bass groove the guitar should've come trailing along behind, but Zig's attention was elsewhere, buried in the tits of some bus stop bitty whose fella wasn't paying her enough mind. But you better believe he noticed some tatted junkie trying to play his woman like a guitar in front of everyone.

Benny tried to intervene. "C'mon, bruv. Do ya thayn layduh. Less blazum music."

"...back the fuck up you fucking butterhead benny bastard I'll fucking kill this fucking bitchcunt is *mine*," Zig hissed, burnt on some new lab junk. He grabbed at this girl by the fistful and suddenly she wasn't digging it anymore; that's when Joe Boyfriend decided to play Joe Hero. He had balls, I'll give him that, but then he got kicked in them and wasn't much good to anybody. The girl pushed at Zig, darkened tears streaking down her cheeks as she begged to be let go. The crowd was quiet as a cemetery—it never occurred to most of them that hardened criminals might actually be dangerous, and in any case they had no idea what to do about it.

But me, I've got a few. My hand was sliding over the familiar wooden grip of Earl's old crowd-pleaser, duct taped under the bar just for special occasions, but then Dodge got up, no harmonica and no drink in his hand, and stood toe to toe with their misbehaving guitarist, so close the crooked straw brim of his hat almost scratched the tip Zig's nose.

"Lady asked to be left alone," he said evenly, stating a fact. "Think you should listen to her."

"...the fuck ever man just wanted to get my what was fuck man..." Zig's head dropped as he shoved the girl back at the crowd and shuffled off to the corner like a kid caught breaking his own toys. My hand relaxed, but the crowd grew restless and began to make for the door. Benny tried to coax Zig Zag back onstage, but he just flipped everyone the bird as he hollered over his shoulder, "...best watch yourself bitch."

"Howya gone sed no to money?" Benny screamed.

The answer was lost as someone kicked down the mic stand with a deafening crash and the cackle of feedback. I covered my ears and I could see all the players jump. I also saw some asshole in a tan trooper's hat come up behind the stage, pointing a gun and hollering at the band. Whatever he yelled was lost under the feedback, Dodge didn't even hear him put two bullets in his back. The hat tumbled from his head and he hit the floor like he'd been tackled, good arm grabbing for something to pull himself up. Vijo bolted out the back door before anyone could look at him twice and Zig Zag wasn't far behind him, while Benny and Ghost put their hands up. Terrified college students were stepping on each other to get out the door and even fleeing through open windows. The crowd-pleaser tore free with a good yank, but then I saw the shooter was waving around a badge as well, still yelling as he walked over and kicked the power cord out of the amp. Suddenly he was coming through in stereo.

He was Sheriff R.P. Coolidge and he had a score to settle with the murdering son of a bitch whose music we all seemed to love so much. He shamed me for employing ex-cons, he shamed them for not doing more with their second chance, and he shamed the

system for letting such a vile and ruthless bastard as Dodge Hardin roam free when he'd put so many officers, innocents, women and children in the ground. I just kept my mouth shut through the whole mess, hoping I'd make it through the day without getting shot or arrested. When he finished his little speech, Sheriff Coolidge dug his bootheel into the wounds he'd inflicted, kicked Dodge over on his side, cocked the hammer of his gun, and demanded to know if his victim had any last words.

"Yup," he said from behind a big shit-eating grin. His good arm shakily placed his hat back on his head. "You're a lousy shot, Coolidge."

There was a shot, blood hit the drum, and a badge clattered to the floor beside a tan trooper's hat with a burnt and bloody hole through its center. I didn't even see Dodge reach, but there's a gun smoking in his hand, a Colt six-shooter so old it had probably shed Union blood. He used the gun to push himself to one knee, and then Benny and Ghost helped him to his feet. I could hear the sirens on their way as they staggered out my back door into the alley. That was the last I saw of Sweet Benny and his Sanchez Penitentiary Band.

I told the cops the whole story, but they insisted on grilling me two more times at the station and showing me lots of mugshots that all looked the same. I positively identified Sweet Benny Pace, a Louisiana con man, and Roger Hardin, a notorious gunfighter, but could provide no info as to their current whereabouts. Though I can't really say I was surprised, what could I have expected? I was just glad the bar was still there when I got back. Had to shut down for a week or two to clean up the mess, and when I re-opened Sue's was even more popular than before. Bands came by and begged me to let them play, kids started to frequent the place like it was just another college watering hole, and after a month or so, it was. They chased out all the regulars—Sue's used to be a whiskey and beer hole, now it was a place to come sip fruity margaritas and hear "indie" music, whatever the fuck that is. Just sounds like a whiny kid with a guitar to me. Sometimes one of them will ask me when Sweet Benny's coming back, and I always tell them he's booked a lifetime gig in the steel motel, but I don't really believe it. See, when the cops were asking me all those questions, there was something I didn't quite recall till I got home that evening.

The flyer Benny had shoved in my shirt pocket; it was for Austin City Limits, a live music festival so big even a loser like me had heard of it. In almost microscopic type under "Local Bands" there they were—Sweet Benny and the Sanchez Penitentiary Band. I was sure then that they weren't on lockdown. They were on a mission, and if we heard from them again it was gonna be just what Benny wanted, on a stage in front of half of Texas, or on a special six o'clock news bulletin. Only time would tell...

BH Shepherd has gone totally gonzo and is holed up in a shack in Texas, known to the locals as Fort Awesome. His first book, Sweet Benny and the Sanchez Penitentiary Band, is nearing completion, fueled by whiskey and country-fried steak. If you'd like to read more about him, check out myspace.com/docawesome.