

Chapter 1

Didgeri-Don't



It all started in 2000, in the shaded pines of the California music festival. I had some time off from the road and decided I needed a weekend of musical therapy. You know what I mean. You head out to a beautiful spot with mountains and rivers and amazing hiking trails. Then spend the next four days in a lawn chair with a beer in your hand, talking about how beautiful all those things are, and of course, focusing on one particular form of cardio exercise: jamming!

Yes, that delightful pastime in which we take a perfectly fine and pristine folk song, and proceed to systematically hammer it into submission. What fun! The guitars and banjos hold the song down, while the fiddles and other screechy perpetrators administer painful monkey punches and wedgies. No song is safe from this onslaught. I've seen stately waltzes reduced to a whimpering puddle; nimble fiddle tunes begging for mercy, and even giants like Sweet Home Alabama or Hotel California mangled beyond all recognition.

Jamming. Or as my Nashville cohorts like to call

it, “picking and grimacing.”

I rolled into my campsite with my bass player and partner in crime, Johnny “4 fingers,” and we began the ancient ritual of bro-camping: dudes with tents, musical instruments and beer, working with smooth precision to build a temporary micro-community. Approximately six songs and a dozen cold ones later, we were done setting up and ready to jam, and open a crack the first cold one. Ahhhhhhhh, what a great feeling: you lean back in your outdoor lazy boy and survey a sea of tents and happy faces. This is how things were intended to be.

The magic of jamming is that it’s not just for the pleasure of those *in* the jam, but also for the new friends that will flock to your camp and follow you through the gates of Hell, if necessary. And flock they did. Two tunes in, we had a herd of admirers listening in awe. And it was only midnight!

We landed the next song with a flourish, and an adorable little grandma wobbled up to me.

“You know”, she said, searching for words, “I’ve never really cared for music much...but, I like what *you* do!”

“Um, thanks ma’am,” I said, gloating over her back handed compliment.

“You bet sonny!” She rasped, winking. *Was she flirting with me?*

Befuddled, I turned to Johnny.

“So, uh, hey, you got another tune?”

Johnny was oblivious, involved in deep conversation with the youngest girl in the audience, a

spry looking 60-something.

Before I could say “dog my cats”, we had a flute player, two more guitar pickers, and someone with a washtub bass. It thumped furiously, sounding like a boxer’s hands landing tired blows on a jellowy midriff. Let it be known that starting up a jam at a music festival is like chumming shark infested seas. Before long the water will be red with the blood of all that is pure and good in music, and the feeding will continue until all the ice chests are empty.

Then, all of a sudden, like a beast from the depths, we heard it. It was a sound hard to define, and it was coming from the edge of the camp. Like a cross between a tuba and the moan of a dying wilder beast, it assailed our ears with a droning somewhere between C and C flat.

Johnny looked like a man who had just seen a ghost.

“Didgeridoo!” he rasped.

I grabbed his arm and shook him. “You know what to do, soldier!” I bellowed. “Circle in!”

With the determination of passengers leaping from a burning bus, we herded the jam into a tight circle. It was the only way. Eyes wide, the jammers followed in shock. They knew that huddling in was the time-honored defense against the sudden appearance of a jams’ most feared natural predator: *the didgeridoo*.

Half trombone, half flute and half sea monster, the didgeridoo has been stalking its prey since time began. Our jam pressed close like gazelles sensing the

presence of a cheetah. The didgeridoo circled in the shadows, just out of reach of the flickering Coleman lanterns.

I sang at the top of my lungs, calling every song I could remember, and then I was finished.

“OK boys, here we go!!!” I roared, waving my banjo in the air like a bayonet and kicking the air. “Let’s take her out!” And with a last triumphant twang, the song was done.

The didgeridoo sputtered in confusion, belched once more, and was silent. A cricket began in the distance. We heard the didgeridoo snort and paw the ground in frustration, and then gallop off into the night. We erupted in cheers and high fives, happy as rescued coal miners.

“We did it! We durned well did it!” chortled a grizzled mandolin player, throwing his hat in the air.

Our lead guitarist dropped his guitar and proceeded to do 30 pushups. Johnny tore his shirt off, leapt onto the table and flexed. I sank into my chair, pale as a ghost, and reached for a cold beer. My life paraded slowly past me as I held it up to my lips with a shaking hand.

“Yes”, I said, “We did it boys. We flippin’ did it.”

And that was when the festival director cantered up in his golf cart and gazed upon us with his Gandalf like eyes. “You have done well, my people,” he intoned, “By what name does this jam go?” It hit me like a bolt of lightning. I stood up and looked the director in the eye. “We Sir, are.... JamAlong!”