

WHEN BAD BILL BADDLEY JR. CAME TO TOWN TO SING THE BLUES

I.

When Bad Bill Baddley Jr. came to town to sing the blues in fall 1968, I invited him to the Yale radio station after his performance to be interviewed on my late night “Diversion” FM progressive rock program. He agreed, perhaps because his father was a Yalie who had dropped out to devote himself to the music business, or perhaps because he was a Vanderbilt descendent. Cornelius was in the class of 1885 and had a dorm named after him, Vanderbilt Hall, with a huge room over the archway reserved forever for student Vanderbilts.

Bad Bill arrived at the radio studio in Hendrie Hall with his guitar just before midnight. He talked with me about his love of the blues and the blues musicians who influenced him and the ones he had met through his father. One listener called in to ask about his father. Everyone I knew was familiar with his father, the record producer Bill Baddley who had discovered and signed the King and Queen of the Blues to contracts with Capitol Records in 1960 and made Capitol the home of the blues until the Beach Boys and Beatles took the color out of Capitol in 1963.

Baddley unconsciously managed his guitar in the dark studio, and effortlessly became a black man singing Willie Dixon’s *Spoonful*, sounding more black than any other white boy, except maybe Paul Butterfield, whose music we also loved. When the interview was over, and someone relieved me, I took Baddley to Jimmy O’Hara’s off-campus apartment for some after hours drinking. I found a 21-year-old senior to buy a bottle of Wild Turkey for Bad Bill, his favorite, he said.

Jimmy was one of the few married undergraduates affiliated with Samuel F. B. Morse. Morse was our seven-year old residential college designed by Eero Saarinen that quietly defied Ivy League architectural tradition by creeping around a sloping courtyard and cocooning students in mostly single rooms, rather than the congenial suite, a change that foreshadowed the evolution of today’s isolate wired individual. Married students were not allowed in the colleges, so Jimmy and his wife lived in a second story apartment in a well kept brownstone, a short walk from the radio station. We walked there from Hendrie Hall. I carried Baddley’s guitar and he carried the whiskey in its brown paper bag. Jimmy buzzed us in and the door was open when we reached the top of the stairs. As we entered the apartment, Jimmy greeted us with the enthusiasm of a blues fan not accustomed to hosting celebrity. Baddley already had 9 LPs and he was only 26. Jimmy’s wife waived us to comfortable seats on old overstuffed furniture in the brightly lit living room. She had decorated with dark upholstery that reflected off the shiny blond hardwood floors. Jimmy seated himself in his maroon wing chair, looking strangely domesticated with his long frizzy Irish-red hair and tie-dyed t-shirt and jeans.

We talked and drank. Jimmy took a baggy of pot out of a drawer in the roll-top desk across the room, put the baggy on the coffee table, and rolled a joint with Zig-Zags he had in his jeans pocket. He offered it to us. Baddley declined, preferring to rely on the Wild Turkey. As we mellowed out, I asked Bad Bill to play some blues. He agreed easily and Jimmy brought him an appropriate wooden kitchen chair. He obliged with a high volume boozy version of Robert Johnson’s *Ramblin’ Blues*, stomping his feet in time, and singing to us, to the window, to the ceiling and to the folks asleep downstairs.

Likely it was the stomping feet, but after a few songs, there was a buzz and a voice on the intercom.

“Police.”

“Come on up,” said a thoughtless jovial Jimmy.

Jimmy’s wife frantically looked at me, wondering what she should do. She should have grabbed the pot on the coffee table and put it somewhere out of sight. Possession was serious then, and Jimmy had been dealing, so there must have been more around. We had some practical immunity on campus, but off-campus, Jimmy was just a townie as far as the police were concerned. Two New Haven policemen appeared at the door, silently looking around the room with a practiced casual curiosity. Jimmy, as a dealer, was uncharacteristically oblivious to the baggy on the coffee table, and greeted the cops with an invitation.

“We have a famous blues singer, Bad Bill Baddley Jr., giving a concert. Why don’t you come in, have a seat, and enjoy.” And he laughed like a great host who knows it can’t get any better than this.

“Sorry, we had a complaint about the noise. It is really too late for a blues concert. Have to ask you to call it an evening,” said the paunchy senior cop.

I noticed the younger partner eyeing the coffee table and as I was sitting there stoned with a glass of liquor and an ID in my billfold that proved I was not 21, I froze, contemplating multiple charges. He nudged the paunchy one, and said to us, “Appreciate your cooperation, but we have to get back to work. You know how it is.” Maybe he was in charge.

They left, thank God. Everyone began breathing normally, unable to speak, as reality dropped on us like a rock from a high place. Bad Bill said he was really tired and asked Jimmy’s wife to call him a cab, which she did. I didn’t wait for the cab. Thanking Jimmy, and Baddley, with much flattery, I left and walked back to Morse, relieved that I was not looking for someone to bail me out of jail, glad tomorrow was Saturday, and wondering why the police didn’t bust us.

II.

It was going to be a warm day, I hoped, after the two week burst of cold that had squeezed thoughts of summer away against the fall. I watched from my window as Morse men went off to class through the open iron gate next to the pale stone guard’s office. Final exams were only a few weeks away. The serious students walked briskly with a forward tilt like they knew where they were going. Others strolled, pondering the meaning of life, or enjoying the spring greenery and April flowers blooming in the tended garden next to the Master’s residence. After a morning toke or two, the odds were lower that the strollers would make it all the way to class, despite their seemingly good intentions.

A knock on my door. The door flew open, and Mick Appel (pronounced like the fruit) entered the room with a rush of wind, cigarette in hand. He took a pack of Luckies out of his pocket, offered me one, and when I declined he exclaimed with a manic grin,

“We’re going to the City, Dave, my man.”

His long brown hair needed a shampoo, and he hadn’t shaved for a couple of days. Sometimes he forgot he was in college. He was a prominent campus retail pot dealer, so he

had to circulate, sharing a taste with his friends qua customers. Thus, he was rarely unstoned, and generally incapable of organizing in his mind the causes of the French revolution, or articulating the argument for the meaninglessness of metaphysical statements without a means of verification. Reading was out of the question. A week or so before exams, he and others who had succumbed to the revolution, would cram and cobble together a mediocre understanding, relying on their native intelligence to articulate fine BS on demand. Reading several books in an evening required great skill and the ability to block out all fear. Tables of contents, introductory and conclusion chapters were required reading. Someone had notes, and charity was still a found virtue in the anti-competitive Sixties counterculture we were actively creating as we went.

“Why and how are we going to the City?”

“I’m picking up a couple of kilos, and you’re company.”

“And how are we getting to the City?”

“I borrowed Randall’s MGB,” he giggled, and took a joint out of the front pocket of his blue and white striped oxford cloth shirt. He lit the joint. “Did you know that he was finally smoking pot? Sheila, too,” he said, passing me the joint.

Mike was wearing a black leather jacket he had borrowed from Henry, who was from the City where black was already a primary color. I had only seen the MGB once when Randall buzzed by as we walked out between Mory’s and Hungry Charley’s to York Street. With the top down and his arm around his Vassar girlfriend, he waved with a big smug smile at us members of the pedestrian underclass.

“Listen, Appel, I can’t go on a road trip today. I have to start thinking about exams, and I thought I would make it to my history class this afternoon. History of the American West with Lamar. Cowboys and Indians, you know, he’s the expert, man, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, Yeah, Yeah. Hey, I’m missing a seminar on urban planning.”

“Uh huh, but going to the City is almost research for you.”

“Going to see Wade Sellars,” he disclosed furtively.

“Really?”

Wade Sellars was a legend. I didn’t know if he was a real person. We heard he lived in the Commodore Hotel next to Grand Central Station and was an international drug dealer. He had a photographic memory and managed to get honors grades at Yale without going to class or even living in New Haven. He rode up for finals on a Harley. He was like a Wild West legend, like Pecos Bill or Paul Bunyan and fittingly, you know, meeting him would actually be like research for my history class. Why would Wade Sellars be dealing with Mick? Sellars was major wholesale – international wholesale. We heard that he had to carry a gun. The only person I knew that carried a gun was a sophomore from Pennsylvania who dressed in a suit all the time, and was a member of the Party of the Right at the Political Union. He was kicked out of school last fall. Yale mostly looked the other way on drugs and booze, but guns were not allowed. I was pretty sure Mick had never been within 100 feet of a gun, other than one carried by a cop. His dad worked for the World Bank after all.

“He’s using my anthro notes,” Mick explained, reading my mind.

III.

We rode down the I-95 in the fast lane with the top down, our long hair blowing uncomfortably in our faces, and white noise reducing conversation to intermittent yelling. But it was a convertible and it was not raining. We passed Sikorsky in Bridgeport and a helicopter was flying over there, then Westport, Darien, and the other bedroom communities where some of our classmates were from. I was from Nebraska, but I knew about these suburbs from TV. Dick Van Dyke's alter ego lived in New Rochelle, which shared its exit sign with "The Pelhams," the only family with its own exit sign.

"What?" Mick yelled at me, leaning his ear, towards me.

"The Pelhams! We're almost there. Why don't we stop in Bronxville and visit Sarah Lawrence? See some chicks." I screamed back.

"I have to get to Wade's. He said he might have to split early this afternoon."

Oh well, I thought. We made our way through City traffic and Mick magically found a parking place in the neighborhood of Grand Central Station. We walked a few blocks to the Commodore. Somewhere down below us was FDR's secret passage from Grand Central terminal to the Waldorf Astoria. I stayed once at the Waldorf with a few friends from high school that were in college out east. They gave us the smallest room in the hotel, but New York was an 18 state and by the end of the evening, we were just passed out all over the room.

We walked up to the front desk like we belonged there if you ignored how we looked with hippie hair, blue jeans and boots. "Could you ring Wade Sellars for us, Room 432?" Mick politely asked the young clean cut guy in the dark blue blazer.

"Are you Mr. Appel?"

"Apple, like the fruit."

"Mr. Sellars had to attend a meeting. He left this note for you." Mick and I read the note.

Mick,

Had some business to attend to. Be back around 3.
Call Jimmy at REgent-7 5783. He'll take care of you.
Call me later.

Wade

We went to a phone booth in the lobby and Mick called the number. "This is Mick. Wade told us to call."

"Hey Mick, Jimmy O'Hara."

"Yeah, where are you?"

"Upper West Side. Come on up."

Mick got the address. He told me it was O'Hara.

"What's he doing in the City?"

"Besides dealing, I don't know. I guess he'll tell us."

We took Broadway all the way up past Columbia into Spanish Harlem. We found Jimmy's place, a fifth floor corner apartment on a busy street two blocks east off Broadway.

We pushed the button for 5-A. Jimmy answered, buzzed us up after our greeting and hugged us as we entered.

“What’s happening, man?” I said.

“Been living here since I got out of jail. You must have heard about the bust.”

“Yeah, we heard something about it,” Mick replied, “What’s the story?”

“Dave remembers the cops showing up when Bill Baddley gave a concert last fall in my living room at two in the morning. Well, they came back a few days later with a search warrant. Didn’t find my stash, but did find almost an ounce of dope I left on the coffee table, again.”

We laughed at that, and I told Mick I saw the young cop looking at the pot on the coffee table that night when they came to tell us to cool it after the neighbors complained about the noise. Jimmy continued, “I got thirty days in the slammer, suspended sentence and probation. Yale kicked me out, and my wife left. My family spotted me some cash to get this place, but they are not too pleased with me right now. I’m dealing a little to get by until I figure out a straight job. Yale will take me back after I show some kind of stability. I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“Jeez, Jimmy. We didn’t hear all that. Sorry. . . Uh, did Wade tell you what I needed?”

“Yeah, I’ve got what you need. It’s somewhere, though, I’ll have to go get it. Have a seat. Here, roll yourself a joint and taste the stuff.” He tossed Mick a baggy with some buds and a pack of papers inside. We sat down on the puke green couch in front of the coffee table Jimmy must have picked up at a dumpster out back. Mick rolled a joint. Jimmy went over to the record player on a table by a window.

“How about some Dylan?” he asked picking up *Blonde on Blonde* from the albums lined up underneath the table. He selected one LP from the double album, and selected a track.

Ain't it just like the night to play tricks when you're tryin' to be so quiet?
We sit here stranded, though we're all doin' our best to deny it.

“Visions of Johanna,” I announced.

“Yeah, reminds me of my wife.” Jimmy turned away from the record player and looked down sadly at the worn loop rug under his feet. The phone rang. Jimmy went to the princess phone on his roll-top desk on the back of the living room.

“Yeah? OK. Be right there.” He hung up and looked at Mick. “I have to go get someone. Umm. . . I’m trying something new. Going to score some skag for resale. I have a source through a friend of a friend at Columbia. He’s got the skag and we have to do the deal here.”

“Shit,” said Mick, and I silently concurred. “Uh, couldn’t we just get our kilos first and leave you with your privacy. I’ve got the cash right here,” he said, patting his wallet in his back pocket.

“I’m really sorry, but I can’t let this guy wait. I don’t really know him, but I really need to do this. Just mellow out and I’ll be right back.” And he left us sitting there, thinking about heroin, and junkies, and narcs, and prison.

“I don’t like this,” I said.

“Me neither. Let’s just try to enjoy Dylan, I guess.” Mick went over to the record player and turned the record over, picking out a song and finding the groove.

Oh, the ragman draws circles
Up and down the block.
I'd ask him what the matter was
But I know that he don't talk.
And the ladies treat me kindly
And furnish me with tape,
But deep inside my heart
I know I can't escape.

“What do you suppose he’s getting at with a ragman drawing circles up and down the block?” Mick said, attempting to distract us from contemplating the starkness of Jimmy’s world that we had entered without warning.

“I don’t know, but I’m not happy with this heroin scene. That’s beyond my interest as company on this day trip.”

“Hey, mellow out, man. Jimmy’s cool. The pot’s just making you paranoid. He’s not going to get us busted. C’mon, Dave. We’ll be out of here in a half hour and on our way back. You’ll get back with time to eat and get to the radio station for your show.”

“Well, I’m thinking I’d rather be studying right now than learning about the heroin trade in Spanish Harlem. I mean, I like to smoke some joints and all, but heroin is like, what? The devil or something. You know, this is not cool.”

“Yeah, yeah, but we’re here, we didn’t do anything, we’re not part of this. Even if the cops did show up, which they won’t, we wouldn’t get busted.”

“You don’t think so?” I rolled my eyes at him. “We would so, and we would have to call our parents, get lawyers, get bail, all that, before they let us go. You’d have to call your dad at the World Bank from jail.”

Mick looked away, turned and threw open the window next to the record player, leaning out, looking down five floors to the street life below, turned to me, took a deep toke, and waving the joint in the air in time to the music, lip-synched to the chorus.

Oh, Mama, can this really be the end?
To be stuck inside of Mobile
With the Memphis blues again.

We sat there getting very stoned, trying to get into the music, but I had a knot in my stomach from the fear of the unknown. In our sheltered campus life, we had missed the reality of drugs and crime. We were kids getting high, but heroin was just plain scary. I don’t think I had even met a junkie. Someone had pointed out someone on Chapel Street once coming out of Olivia’s at two in the morning with a cup of coffee to go that we thought was a junkie, but, you know, this just wasn’t our world. I had the sudden rare humility to think of myself as the teenager from Omaha that I was.

I was thinking all of a sudden about the time I opened my parents’ bedroom door one night and was surprised to see my Dad on his knees praying. He looked up at me and didn’t say anything, and I shut the door, embarrassed. I was snapped back to reality when the

apartment door swung open and Jimmy rushed in with a guy in a fringed suede jacket that was too big for him. He needed a shave, too. His hair was black, long and greasy. He had a brown suitcase with him. He stood near the door, silent, as Jimmy went into the bedroom in the back. He returned quickly with a big roll of bills, more cash than I had ever seen except on TV. Jimmy went over to the record player, and put on the Jefferson Airplane's Surrealistic Pillow for some reason, took the rubber band off his roll and started counting his cash for the deal. The guy walked over with his suitcase and put it down by his feet on the loop rug. He watched as Jimmy counted the money. Jimmy looked up and smiled at the guy, handing over his roll. "Here, count it," he said.

The guy said, "I trust you." and put the money in his pocket.

Then, he grabbed Jimmy by the lapels and before we could even gasp, in one pre-choreographed move, he pushed Jimmy over to the window and with a couple swift two-handed shoves, Jimmy went out the open window backwards. We heard him scream. The guy grabbed his suitcase and ran to the door. He stopped, looked at us and said, "You're lucky I don't have a gun with me. Say anything and you're dead." And he left us in a hurry.

Stunned, we leaped up, looking at each other. Mick ran to the window, looked down, looked back at me and said, "We got to get out of this place."

"If it's the last thing we ever do," I said under my breath as we ran down the stairs and walked out the front door like we were just finished visiting the neighbors. The front door was around the corner from Jimmy's body, and we went the other way, to get away, and Mick said we needed to find a phone booth somewhere away from here.

"Should we call the police?" I added.

"Do you remember what the guy looked like? What? Guy in a brown leather jacket with a mustache?"

"No, he was wearing a suede jacket and needed a shave."

"See, we're no help. What could we tell them that Jimmy's body lying on the cement couldn't?"

"I don't know." I shrugged. "Maybe we should, though."

"I've got to call Wade. This is Wade's world after all."

We found a phone. Mick called Wade, and fortunately, he was back at the hotel. Mick gushed the events at Wade and paused. He turned to me, holding his hand over the phone mouthpiece, "Wade says we should go back to Yale and forget this happened. He says there's nothing we can do to help Jimmy or the cops."

"And we should take his advice because . . ."

"We're taking his advice," Mick interrupted, yelling in my face, getting back on the phone, he said, "Thanks, Wade, I'll call you when I get back to New Haven. Yeah, yeah, I left you the anthro notes with Blue Blazer man." And he hung up the phone, shaking his head. "Let's get out of here. Jeez, Wade is so cold, man." He pulled his pack of Luckies out of his jacket pocket and lit one up with his Zippo. I grabbed a cigarette from the pack and he lit it for me.

We both took a couple of drags, and headed back to Randall's MGB as nonchalantly as we could, hoping at least, that the car had not been stolen by the natives.

Forty-five minutes later, we were in Connecticut, thank God, Mother Yale waiting to comfort us. Mick pulled off the I-95 at a rest stop. He just stopped there. It was dark now. We put the top up. I went into the restaurant for a couple of Cokes and some french fries.

We sat on top of a picnic table with our feet on the benches, drinking our Cokes, eating our fries.

“Damn, I’ve got to master these things!” Mick said, wiping the ketchup off that had squirted from the packet all over his jeans. “What the hell were we doing at Drug Dealers Amateur Night? I just wanted to score some pot.”

“All of a sudden, I really feel like studying tonight. Repent. Take my mind off all this,” I said, “I think I’ll call the radio station and get someone to replace me on my show tonight.”

“Yeah, sure, and I think I’ll try to get some beer,” Mick replied, “Dammit, I am so out of pot.”

“You know, witnessing a murder is exciting and all, but I think I would rather have just met Wade Sellars on this road trip.” And I walked away to find a phone booth.