THE HEIST

Why Rob a Record Store?

2013

How do you explain to people that you once robbed a record store? I've been thinking about this a lot after the store, New York's Bleecker Bob's, closed last year. My hope is that my one small contribution to "shrinkage"—as theft is dutifully acknowledged on the balance sheets—did not ultimately contribute, decades later, to the store's downfall. But I'm not an economist. I don't know how the butterfly effect works.

In the twenty-teens, record stores are fragile businesses. Robbing one now would be morally equivalent to replacing all the candy bars in a Red Cross packet with animal droppings. I try to convey my sincerity when retelling the story. Yes, Bleecker Bob's was a good store, with knowledgeable staff and a great selection. Yes, I genuinely regret my actions. Sometimes my own deep shame forces a defensiveness. "Look, it was the eighties," I explain. "Everyone was doing it."

Some context: by 1989, it had been two decades since a sanitation strike ushered in an era of Big Apple apathy, crime, fear, and filth. New York had long since become known as a place where normal rules of conduct had been suspended. Films of the seventies and eighties documented the defensive measure required to live in this city, all those comical locks and deadbolts and roll gates covered in misspelled graffiti. But there's far less documentation of all the offensive measures taken by New Yorkers. It seemed like everyone carried some sort of weapon. There was the classmate with a hammer in his backpack, and the bike messengers who brandished locks and chains like gangs in a sci-fi apocalypse. There was the time my taxi driver produced a crowbar to fight a rival cabbie, as if he'd taken a wrong turn and ended up in *Grand Theft Auto*. Everyone was angry.

Even though I was in college and lived in a luxury apartment, I too felt I had the right to be angry. For one thing, the luxury apartment was a scam. In order to afford the $1,300 rent on the two-room unit, my two roommates and I took on two extra roommates. I'm sure the five of us thought we were scamming the landlord, but one could also argue that we'd perpetrated

a much larger scam on ourselves by converting a classy condo into a *Gangs of New York*-era tenement.[31]

Certainly our neighbors felt scammed. They were the ones paying exorbitant rents to share a building with a frat house/flophouse. Visitors to our fraphouse would write their names in the elevator with markers. Strange men who lived in abandoned buildings would pop by late at night to avail themselves of our shower, or the building's communal laundry room. We recorded several demos for fake punk bands in the apartment, each involving real guitar amps. At some point, fellow tenants piled up bags of trash in front of our door as a sort of micro-sanitation strike.

The main culprits here were my two original roommates. Bill—not his real name—and Neil—very much his real name—were the guys who would bust in breathless, demanding that I immediately come to the roof to "see what we did" as police sirens grew louder in the distance.[32] Some of their shenanigans bordered on the irresponsible. Together, they would light discarded Christmas trees on fire, or hurl objects off the roof, or roll barrels down subway steps.

To their credit, neither Bill nor Neil were the worst behaved gentlemen in our larger social circle, let alone the city itself. In this same way, their hijinks provided a valuable service within the tiny ecosystem of the apartment. For all my own bad behavior, I still wasn't as bad as them.

Although I had my moments. For example, I accidentally smashed out Bill's front teeth with a frying pan. I don't mean "accidentally" in that sarcastic, sinister, organized crime way. It was a genuine accident. We were playing the Let's Throw Progressively Larger Objects At Each Other game, and, you know: oops.[33] It could easily have been me who'd inexplicably failed to catch that cast iron skillet. Afterward, while all of us were trying to figure out how Bill was going to make it through a three-day weekend with a mouthful of exposed nerve endings, I offered him any one rare record, from my own collection, that might take away a bit of the pain.

I mention this detail to underscore the importance of vinyl (both albums and seven-inch EPs) to all of us. I was building what turned into a formidable record collection, one that was "sourced ethically," meaning original price, trade, or—in early 1989—liberated from any store I deemed evil. Ten years later, when anti-Napster record executives would invoke visions of reckless music thieves, they would more or less be talking about me and my pals. We believed we had the right to illegally download physical records from the stores that supplied them. I didn't partake in any of the outright robberies, but there were several

incidents of employee-assisted 98 percent-discounts that I can't say I'm proud of. Could our illicit shopping sprees have contributed to the death of Tower Records seventeen years later? Again: not an economist. I hope not.

Our beef against record stores felt ideological.[34] We believed that many of these records had been overpriced. Our confiscation of such incorrectly priced consumer goods had the delusional feel of a civic duty, not unlike the time, years later, when Neil would destroy an uncooperative payphone with a claw hammer. So when Bleecker Bob's eventually drifted onto our radar, at no point did anyone discuss stealing money. That would have been gauche. Our target was the store's collection of rare hardcore punk seven-inches. These were split alphabetically. The box we wanted was labeled A-M.

We knew this box was the juiciest catch because we'd done reconnaissance. And we'd put in the reconnaissance time because it was my plan. I brought a measure of cautious prudence to the group. For example, before we'd embarked on the prank call marathons that came to replace television as a communal roommate activity, I was the one who insisted we first check with the operator to see if a crank call could be traced. "But my life was threatened!" I pleaded. "Are you really telling me there's NO way you can find out who did this?"

So I planned the robbery with the care of a professional jewel heist. Our raid would take place during the Super Bowl, when the fewest people would be out. Neil would go to the counter, ask for the A-M box, and casually flip through the records. We practiced his casual flipping. At a prearranged time—I had us synchronize watches—I would call the store from a payphone, distracting the clerk. Neil would grab the box and sprint. Bill would be standing by the bulletin board near the front door. His role was the clueless bumbler, a random stranger who would "accidentally" get in the clerk's way as he attempted to give chase. This time I did mean the word with underworld sarcasm.

On Sunday night, the streets were indeed empty. I walked to my predetermined pay phone in a funk. TV screens illuminated the windows of apartments, and it occurred to me that Super Bowl XXIII was an odd parallel to what we were doing. I'd diagrammed our moves like a coach. It was as if the three of us were one team and society was the other team, and society, being composed of everyone, had an insurmountable advantage. I'd picked the safest role in the caper, but could I be sure they couldn't trace pay phones? Could they lift fingerprints from the receiver? What was I doing?

I placed my call, and walked a long route home. I tried to picture Neil running victorious through the streets, his box of A-M records tucked under one arm, unconsciously imitating

49ers running back Roger Craig as he led his team to victory in Miami. But the image seemed bogus. I'd done something irreparably wrong. The moment was creepy.

Back at the apartment, Bill and I waited. And waited. I did my job on the phone, he'd done his job with the bumbling. Had Neil been caught? If caught, would he name names? If the cops came, would I be able to keep my cool and work the plausible deniability angle? *No, officer, I don't know either of these men, despite the fact that they live here. A lot of people live in this apartment, and I can't be expected to keep track of each and every one.*

Neil did finally arrive, sweaty and shaken. At the last moment he'd gotten spooked, grabbed as many records as he could stuff down his pants, and dashed out the door. In his panic, he'd forgotten the route I'd so carefully mapped out, bolting in blind criminal terror through the deserted streets of the East Village. Two cops stopped him. When asked where he was going in such a rush, he said "home," and when asked where that was, he found he could no longer remember. Unwilling to search his pants, they instead took down his ID information, promising a visit if anyone reported anything suspicious.

We inspected the haul in demoralized silence. He'd grabbed five records, all from the D section. Four were garbage. It's remarkable how many truly terrible punk bands start with the letter D. But the fifth record, Discharge's *Never Again*, was a decent catch. I went to cheer the group up by playing this record, only then noticing that it had gotten gouged on Neil's belt buckle. We'd destroyed something beautiful and finite. My only hope was when the cops came, I could use this sorrow to leverage some sort of plea deal. And although the Internet informs me that the statute of limitations has long since run out on this particular crime, I've gone straight ever since.