

# Chuck the Prophet, and Bill the Picker

## Joy and Sorrow

It was Wednesday in Northern Kentucky. Fall started on Monday, then finished on Tuesday, and now winter was here. I was heading to the Southgate House Revival in Newport with mixed emotions. Chuck Prophet and the Mission Express were playing tonight, which was the positive emotion in the mix, but the mix was an uneasy colour.

I had a friend who had been very ill, and it had been a couple of weeks since I had been in contact, or had heard any news. Bill the Picker had been a good friend during my time in Covington, Kentucky – just over the Licking River from tonight's gig in Newport. Bill was not the 'Curtis Loew' kind of picker, Bill was the kind who picked up any tin cans or copper that could be recycled, and he cashed them in to keep his world ticking over. In the summer months Bill would take a rest on my porch, and have a drink while he listened to the music coming out through my screen door. He liked his music too, and we talked about this and that while I also took a break from old house renovations. I always had some copper for him from my many plumbing stuff ups.

Now winter was here, and Bill was gone.

I had last seen Bill in hospital 3 weeks ago; he was in a bad way, but on the mend – so he said. I had been out of town since then, so I had texted him a couple of times over the last few days, but with no reply. I called the hospital, but he wasn't there, and the person I spoke to didn't know any more. So, earlier in the afternoon, I took a walk down Jefferson Ave, to see if he had been shipped back to his basement apartment.

When I got there, there was a dumpster out front, and a trail of odds n ends from the half full dumpster to the basement apartment door. Bill's 70's state of the art cassette player was in line to be dumped, but maybe the shifters knocked off for the day. I asked two young girls who lived back up at street level if they knew what was going on, but all they knew was that Bill is not coming back, and they continued to chalk patterns on the steps. So I walked home.

The first beer at the Southgate House disappeared like it was summertime again. I got a second beer, and made my way to a spot in front of Chuck's microphone stand;

a spare chair in an all-seated, all-masked, covid defiant room. It became quite hypnotic, as there was no pushing or shoving, no beer spilling, and the stained glass windows of this old converted church seemed to enhance the serenity.

Out came Chuck and the band, and once on stage they took off their masks; “just to watch me cry” ...the lyrics from their song ‘Castro Halloween’ but that would be later. First up were some rockers from the ‘Night Surfer’ album.

Chuck likes a chat in between songs. The new concrete ‘live music venues’ popping up around this old venue “were not here last time we were in town” reported CP. I could relate to that, as my two year covid exile was over the same period. However, the dim lights and easy bar access at this old repurposed church kept this venue as my personal favorite.

What I could relate to even stronger, was Chuck’s intro to ‘Killing Machine’.

”I just can’t understand how we allow people to just walk into a shop and buy a gun, and then off they go and shoot people” was his intro. I loved that some people have the balls to say what is blatantly obvious to most of the Western World, but may also cheese off quite a few in the ‘here and now’. Maybe the takings at the merchandise stall will be down tonight. I heard a few grumbles, muffled under masks. I one hand clapped on my thigh (beer in the other hand) but in the cold stillness, it felt like a ‘Hoot n Holler’ moment. There are a few rock and roll quotes that stayed with me over the years, and one was by John Lydon from the Pistols; “Go where you’re least wanted; there’s more to achieve”. Chuck’s words had a little bit of that in them.

I remembered how other bands that I used to love, still sing about ‘Gods and Guns’ under a Confederate Flag, and not too far from here actually. Anyway, nice one Chuck.

The songs kicked on, and Stephanie Finch floated from keyboard, to squeeze box, to guitar and vocals, and I began to drift somewhere inside of myself. For some reason I was recalling visiting my son in prison, and how he would tell me that he was okay, and then how I would drive home with the special songs playing in the car; I’d be teary, but at least he was okay, and the comfort that thought brings. And then, not too far back, I recalled the girl that left me without even a goodbye after years together. I had taken her to see Chuck play in the UK, and she loved the gig. I gave her Chuck Prophet CD’s, and she gave me a book called ‘The Prophet’ by Kahil Gibran. I think she did better in the trade.

Meanwhile, the band were playing 'Castro Halloween' and I snapped out of those memories that brought 'joy and sorrow' from the same place; as per the observations in the old book that she gave me.

The band left the stage, and I switched my phone on to check the time; last bus or Uber?

More importantly there was a notification saying 'New message from Bill the Picker', so while the crowd called for 'more', I quickly opened the message, and squinted at the text.

"They moved me to rehab out of town, they are getting me fixed up. I'm okay mate, see you soon. Bill".

And out came Chuck alone to start another favorite song, 'Summertime Thing', alone on acoustic guitar. Soon the Mission Express were with him, and the acoustic was replaced with electric, and off they rocked, and I felt great.

I remembered another rock and roll quote, this one by Mick Jones of the Clash. He was talking about going to see bands before the New Wave hit "Some of them took your money, but left you how they found you". I had been for a trip on the Mission Express, and came back somewhat different. Now it didn't seem as cold outside.