

## Excerpt from “Play It By Ear”, a novel by E.R. Bartley

### *XXI. Jump Back, Jack!*

*The crowd roared* and whistled when The Earl of Dukes took over the stage on Saturday night at the Jump Back Club in Boone, with reflections of the spotlight flashing off the plethora of sequins and silver cowboy belt buckles. There had been a noticeable groundswell of interest in young Bobby at this particular club. After the shows the two previous nights, some young college girls had swarmed around him to get his autograph. Tonight one of the cuties had wanted Bobby’s autograph on Earl’s latest CD album! When Bobby saw Earl eyeballing him from the edge of the stage, he immediately deferred to him. “Ladies, I’m afraid I wasn’t even with the band when they recorded any of the songs on this album. You really should take the opportunity to grab the star of the show while he’s close by. Then you’ll have your hands on a real treasure.” And with that Bobby disappeared out the back door of the club. He didn’t want Earl pouting with him the whole time they were tearing down equipment. It had been a long week and Bobby just wanted to hurry up, get done and back to Sarah.

By this time Sarah had tired of the club scene and had stayed in the hotel room – a luxury she didn’t always have. Sometimes she only had the bus as a retreat, which reeked of beer and stale smoke. She was so tired of those guys on the bus. She was usually the only wife – or girl. Interestingly enough, even though Earl could be surly and sarcastic with all the guys and girlfriends, he was always polite to Sarah, though for the most part he avoided her, but sometimes if she and Bobby got into a little lover’s spat, Earl would intrude to take Sarah’s side and tell Bobby to quit being a jerk. This seemed highly uncharacteristic of Earl to the whole group. Sarah had so little experience with the life of a traveling band that she didn’t realize how unusual it was for a band leader to allow one of the wives to travel everywhere with a group like this one.

Normally the band would perform one night at a time in a club or concert, then hit the road in the bus and sleep, each member taking a turn at driving as they headed to the next gig, or back to home base, but this was a brand new club that booked the show bands Thursday through Saturday nights each week. The place was packed every night.

Bobby had started off meekly enough with Earl’s band, never venturing to show off too much behind his keyboards. He’d had to scramble to get a rig suitable for The Earl of Dukes Band since he was primarily a guitar man. But, in the long run, all those years of Mom-induced piano lessons had gotten him this job. Not that he needed to be a great player, by any means. Most of the music coming out of the speakers was sequenced anyway – they were just a glorified karaoke band.

Bobby didn’t know it in the beginning, but eventually he surmised that it had actually helped when Earl found out that he had been a part time mechanic back in Weaverville. Karl, the drummer in his dad’s band, had a little mechanic shop with more business that he could handle and he paid Bobby by the hour to help him out. Karl had always thought that if not for

the easy band money, he'd have done something with NASCAR. Loud cars and loud music were his true loves.

It turned out that Earl had spent a wad of moola on bus repairs. Not only that, there were too many times that the big behemoth had left them standing on the side of the road. Consequently Earl did his hiring with an eye for mechanical know how being as important, if not more so, than musical ability.

The first couple of months on the road, Bobby got an education he would have been just as happy without. There was no doubt that Barbra had grossly misrepresented this whole deal. Not only were all the band members expected to take their turns at driving after a hard night of working, but also they had to unload, set up and reload the sound system and all the equipment for every job. Bobby had been used to doing that with his dad's band, but this had been billed by Barbra as being the big time. He never heard of a big time band member who had to work like a pulpwood peon before dazzling the audience with magic fingers.

The first multi-night booking that Earl's band had after Bobby joined the group was just outside of Chattanooga. While they were playing there, Earl rented two house trailers at a weird low-rent bed and breakfast / motel / trailer park business. Bobby didn't have any idea what the cost of the trailer rental was, but he hoped Earl was getting a good deal. They were clean enough on the inside but the furnishings were painfully shoddy. Each trailer had three bedrooms, and Earl split the band up in half. Earl assigned Sarah and Bobby to the "best" of the available bedrooms, which was really nice of Earl. Bobby and Sarah actually had a closet in their room. Earl usually slept on the bus even when they got rooms.

The guitar player, Dave, always stayed out all night when they had rooms on the road. Each morning he would shower before bed, and then sleep most of the day, arising just in time to eat a huge meal and then go to the job.

While at the trailers in Chattanooga he would come in just as Sarah was awakening in the morning. Fortunately by then he was sobered up enough to behave himself. Their first morning in the trailer, Sarah waited for Dave to finish in the bathroom, and then quietly padded in behind him. The rest of the place was still sound asleep.

After a few minutes she stuck her head out of the bathroom door. "Dave!" she practically shouted in a loud stage whisper ... "Dave!"

Dave walked out of his room rubbing his head with a towel. "What is it, Sarah?"

"The towels you left in the bathroom here are all wet."

"Oh, uh, guess you don't have a towel to shower with, huh?" Dave was brilliant.

"No, I don't. What am I supposed to use? How come you used ALL the towels?"

"Well, I just grabbed one and dried off with it and then wrapped my head in another one. Then I had to have a clean one for my face," Dave explained.

"I don't understand," said Sarah, "why you had to grab the last towel for your face. Why didn't you just use the one you'd already used on your body?"

"Well, you know ... I'd used that one on my privates! I couldn't use it on my face. Duh, Sarah."

“Duh nothing, Dave. Am I supposed to use the one you left in here on the floor on my face?”

“Guess not, if you don’t want to. ‘Night, Sarah.” Dave turned around and went back into his trailer bedroom and shut the door loudly enough to wake everyone up.

Bobby and Sarah tended to be perpetually late to everything. Whenever there was a practice called and Bobby showed up late, or if he were late to board the bus for a trip, Earl would dock Bobby twenty off the top of his next paycheck. Earl was rigid in his expectations of his employees.

The rumor was that he was so “anal-retentive” that he had flipped out once with a girlfriend; some said it was a wife. He beat her up so badly that she was unrecognizable when the cops got to the house and had to call an ambulance for her. Earl could be peculiar although Bobby really didn’t see him as a violent type. Sarah didn’t believe that Earl was a wife beater, either. They knew how easily rumors got started, especially about people in the public eye.

Earl always slept on the bus when they traveled. He’d get on board and lock up the doors so no one could get on. If one of the band members wanted to get something off the bus during the night, they just had to wait. Those doors didn’t open until sunup the next morning.

The band’s drummer told Bobby that right after he had joined the band, they ended up canceling some jobs because Earl had to deal with a court hearing for a paternity suit. He had to have all the DNA testing and everything. It turned out that one of his crazy fans managed to seduce him and she claimed that he got her pregnant. The drummer said it was funny, because after it was all over with and the truth came out that Earl was not the father, he seemed disappointed somehow, like he was really hoping that it was his baby, even though he had protested it loudly from the beginning. The drummer said that after that, Earl stuck to himself a lot on the road. He’d pick up a girl now and then, but he seemed to be real careful about not getting into any situations where he wasn’t completely in control.

Bobby could see that Earl avoided the general public if they were in an area where there were likely to be fans, especially coming off the bus. To Bobby, it seemed that Earl could have the world by the tail if he wanted. He had attained a certain level of fame; he had a lot of talent, and a love for making his music, but he was quiet when he didn’t have on his entertainer face and he usually seemed distant to a degree even when he was having fun. Bobby thought it was sad that he couldn’t enjoy the benefits of his success. He began to wonder if mortgaging your talent and your love of music for the almighty dollar was really worth it in the end.

Bobby had settled in by the time the band played the Jump Back Club and was beginning to find his place in the band. He was beginning to add something significant to the mix. It was pretty obvious that the crowd was “into” his keyboard rides. He just wished his Sarah could have been there to see how they all loved him in Boone.

The Earl of Dukes Band was an ever-changing cast of characters. Earl was the star and what with the sequencing tracks ever present, the musicians were just stage props for the most part.

By the end of his second month with the band, Bobby had seen the turnover of two pickers through the revolving door of the Earl of Dukes Band. Only the stage manager who was Earl's cousin, and Toby the bass player who, from the looks of him, had crawled out from under a very slimy rock, had been with the band for the whole six years of its existence. Earl pretty much ignored Toby, even though he was valuable in many ways. Eventually, in retrospect, Bobby would speculate that Toby must have had something on Earl that kept him in the band for all those years.

The funny thing was that Toby was the only one who was consistently kind and polite to Bobby. He was probably stoned most of the time. It hadn't taken Bobby too long to figure out why Toby was never required to take a turn behind the wheel of the bus when they were on the road. But Toby could many times get the old bus motor purring again if he was sober enough when it broke down.

Aside from mechanical abilities, Earl liked to choose employees who were easily managed by whatever means he chose to use. Earl was a master of passive aggressive control. At face value to his fans he was gregarious and happy and loved to sing and entertain. But in reality he was as much of a control freak as Bobby's dad. The main difference was that underneath their equally cheerful stage façades, Mett and Earl were as different as night and day. In Mett there was no guile. He was exactly what he appeared to be – and damn proud of it.

But Earl had a dark and complicated underside that Bobby couldn't have comprehended if he'd had the experience to understand it. Bobby noticed the sideways glances that came from the front of the stage if he played with a little too much flare, or if he yukked it up with the young girls after a show. The result was that Earl wouldn't have much to say to him for a while, but Bobby was used to a "boss" who could enjoy a good pout. It just never occurred to him how vindictive Earl might be capable of being.

Bobby frowned to himself as he thought about her sitting back at the hotel, reading paperbacks she'd bought from the truck stops and watching "Nick at Night." He wished he had remembered to tell her to stay in the room and not to go roaming around tonight while he was gone. The thrill of being an entertainer's wife had quickly lost its zing for Sarah, and Bobby felt bad for her.

If they had had more time to think all this through, he knew he'd have never taken this job. He wasn't really excited about it at all once he found out all the details, but his folks had backed him into a corner, with all the guilt that they'd heaped on him about the time, effort and money they'd already sunk into his career and with phrases like "over my dead body." His gut reaction that night had been to walk out their back door and never look back.

But, Bobby knew in his heart – maybe even during the big "discussion" with his parents – that he would have given up the fight and caved in if it had not been for Sarah. She wanted so much to start out their life together independent of two sets of interfering parents. He did, too. He just had a better working knowledge of what the life on the road was going to be like. But, Sarah had never been on the road and she was desperate to take a bite of a life she'd never experienced. She and Bobby had worked so hard to finish their schooling early, and to save

every nickel along the way, with their only goal being that of marrying at the earliest possible date.

As the guys were all tearing down equipment that night, Bobby looked around at the band members and their roadie, "excuse me" thought Bobby, their "stage manager" and wondered, "where in the world am I headed?"

Earl was a talented entertainer and only in his early thirties, which seemed pretty old to Bobby. In Bobby's eyes, it gave him a "has-been" quality; only he had never really BEEN anyone. Earl seemed jealous and paranoid and no fun once Bobby was entrenched in the group. With their schedule, Bobby hadn't had time to analyze the situation with an eye for looking for another gig. With all the noise on the bus, those hours were spent talking to Sarah or playing for himself and Sarah on his guitar. He and the Earl of Dukes Band's guitar player, "Dapper Dave" had spent some time early on playing together on the bus, but to Bobby it was no fun at all. He'd have to downplay his ability to keep from offending Dap, who was a joke as a guitar player.

Dapper Dave's name did not come from his propensity to be a snappy dresser, but rather from the initials of his name, David Allen Porter - Dap, for short. Sarah called him "Dave the Dip" when she was alone with Bobby and said his middle name was really "Insipid."

After the Jump Back job was over that night and all the equipment loaded, the guys holed up in the bus to collect their pay for the night. Earl had already divvied up each member's portion and handed it out telling the guys to count it behind him. Bobby counted his twelve twenties and one ten – they got paid at the end of each night at this job - and stuffed it in his pocket. He had made about the same amount of money per job with E Sharp Major. But with Earl they played more jobs so his total was two to three times the gross of his pay with Mett's band.

As soon as Dapper Dave counted his share, he stood up and reached out to shake hands with Earl. Earl glared at him.

"It's been real and it's been fun ... but it ain't been real fun." With that he pushed open the Earl of Duke Band's proverbial revolving door, stepped off the bus and escaped to a waiting red Mustang with the convertible top skinned back to reveal a head and face full of bleached blond hair and false eyelashes. Bobby looked out the window and watched as the couple peeled out. He concluded immediately that the cleavage was probably no more real than her eyelashes.

All the way back to the Hampton Inn, Bobby tried as dispassionately as he could manage to feign to convince Earl to let him take over as rhythm guitarist for the band. Bobby knew that Earl was the only one allowed to wow the crowd with his guitar, but for crying out loud, Dave had played about half of the songs with a capo because he could only play in one or two keys.

Earl was subdued for a couple of minutes, ignoring Bobby's palpable excitement. Finally Earl put his hand up and stopped Bobby. He visibly slid into his front-man persona and smiled at Bobby. "Listen, Son, we're all tired tonight and it looks like we're going to have to regroup anyway. We'll talk about all this on the long ride home tomorrow. We've got five clear days before the next booking, so there's no need to decide anything until after a good night's sleep." And the case was closed for the time being.

Sarah combed through her hair, twisted and balled it up and stuck the pencil she'd been using for a crossword puzzle through it to hold it in a bun. It was so nice to be staying at the Hampton Inn – not that it was the epitome of plush - it was just so much nicer than the always “locally-owned inns” that Earl booked for them - when they would actually get a room on the road. And even then, they were responsible for half of their bill since Bobby couldn't bunk in with one of the other band members. Sarah couldn't decide if it was more offensive to room in the seedy hotels or just ride all night in the even seedier bus. This week the club owner had provided their rooms, and Sarah was surprised at what a pleasure it was to be somewhere that every smell and sight didn't nauseate her. She dreaded the five-hour bus ride back to Weaverville, but at least they would be home and not have to drive home from Earl's place. She was so glad that Weaverville had been en route for Earl on this trip.

Sarah grabbed her key card and a couple of twenty-dollar bills and stuffed them into her jeans pocket so that she wouldn't have to carry a purse and set out across the hotel parking lot up to the street corner. The traffic was light and she scooted across the side street to the K-Mart parking lot and into the front door. Bobby was upset that morning when he had seen the K-Mart bag in the room until she explained that she had needed some tampons. He quickly changed the subject, frowning at the implications of her purchase and fortunately had not thought to forbid her to go wandering around outside by herself that evening. She would have gone anyway, but she was glad she didn't have to rationalize her way out of going against his wishes and she could dispose of the plastic bag evidence this time.

Sarah didn't linger as long tonight as she had last night. She picked up a few items that she should have remembered the evening before, considering the amount of time she had spent browsing. Then she went through the checkout, grabbing up a pack of Lance Nip-Chee crackers and headed out the door. Noticing the ladies room door on the way to the exit, she felt a sudden urge to go and decided it would be easier to go here than to carry a full bladder across two parking lots. She went into the last stall, toilet-papered the seat like her mother always insisted, opened her K-Mart bag and took out one of the items just purchased. Three minutes later she was wondering if Jeff Foxworthy would pay her for a fresh redneck joke: “You might be a redneck if you buy an “EPT” test and find out you're pregnant in the K-Mart restroom.”

If not from Jeff Foxworthy, she knew that some money better be coming from somewhere. Sarah had graduated at the top of her nursing class and had a job all lined up to start at Doctors Memorial Hospital in Weaverville when they got back from the honeymoon. The benefits hadn't meant much to her when she was interviewing for the job. All she had cared about then was the pay, but now she understood how handy medical insurance could be.

Bobby was disappointed that he couldn't “accidentally” waken Sarah when he got back to the room. He knew that he wasn't going to get lucky, what with the purchase she had made the night before, but he wanted to tell her the news about Dapper Dave leaving the band and about how the crowd had loved her “Wooby” tonight.

That good night sleep that Earl referred to meant from about two a.m. to seven a.m. The guys had been instructed to meet at the continental breakfast as soon as it started at seven, or to be on the bus no later than 7:15.

Bobby would usually drive the first shift. It was so hard for him to get up that early, but once awake, he was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed – an advantage of youth.

The black out curtains masked that fact that the sun was full in the sky when Bobby woke with a start. When he saw that the clock said 9:11 he jumped up and was standing straight up in one motion. Then he heard the sound of the shower running and knew that Sarah had been up for a while. Someone must have knocked on the door and told her not to hurry. The behemoth must be on the fritz again. Bobby was glad for the two extra hours of sleep, but this was going to put them behind getting home. Then he remembered last night and all the sudden that Sunday morning was like Christmas morning and he was going to get a great present from Santa! He did a little jig right there standing in his boxers, then put on his jeans and shirt from the night before and slipped out the door, forgetting his door key, which he always did. Oh well, he'd go on down and grab an apple or banana from the continental breakfast buffet and check on the progress with the bus. By then Sarah would be out of the shower. Maybe he and Earl could have a talk over breakfast while the bus was being fixed. There were no signs of any of the band members in the hotel lobby – only a harried looking father with two kids who were at that moment playing in the cereal dispenser, in spite of the threats from their dad. It occurred to Bobby that the mother was probably enjoying a quiet shower time knowing that she didn't have to hurry to fix the kid's breakfasts. He remembered that was always what happened when as a boy he would travel with his family. Dad and the kids got sent to the lobby for the free breakfast while Mom got a few minutes in the bathroom to herself. There was a middle-aged couple sharing the Sunday paper, and a group of young girls and their obvious chaperone just leaving after making a huge mess on the biggest table in the lobby.

"Maybe all the other guys are still asleep, too," Bobby thought. Just then he did a double take at the hotel front door. They had parked the bus just across the parking lot from the front door last night. It was not there. He ran out to the parking lot and around the outside of the whole hotel. He scanned the horizon for any signs of a gas station where the bus might be gassing up, but there were no signs of it anywhere.

Breathless he headed back inside and went to the perky young woman at the front desk. Her response to Bobby's inquiry was, "Oh they checked out two hours ago." They said that one of the rooms was still occupied, but that you'd be out by checkout time. Would you like check out now ... sir?" She hadn't planned to call him "sir" since he looked to be no older than she was, but then after the hesitation she added the "sir" in an effort to make herself seem more professional. He was way cute and she was trying to figure out the best way she could to impress him quickly during their brief transaction.