

A Checkered Past

I first met the Checkerboard Guy in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1988. It was the first day of a 17-day festival that would put Halifax back on the map. It had been a long time since any Titanic frozen bodies had washed up on her shore.

Buskerfest '88 was not run by “he who shall remain nose less” in those days, he came in '89. The first Halifax Buskerfest was one of the best experiences in my life.

The entire town welcomed the “buskers”. Every shop and restaurant downtown had some sort of busker theme display in their window. The posters were cool, the pins even cooler but nothing compared to the People's Choice Award trophy. Over two feet tall and solid brass it was one of four statues sculpted specifically for the festival. They probably only made four because they weren't sure if the festival would fly.

Well fly it did ... and it all started for me when I met the Checkerboard Guy. He was driving a mini cooper that had a checkerboard paint job. “Too cool”, I thought as I walked up and introduced myself to a very young but obviously together promo wise performer. He said his name was David and he had driven all the way cross Canada to the fest. We had a common interest in British cars so he showed me all the in's and out's of his Mini and we immediately became friends.

David seemed almost too smart and articulate to be a street performer, let alone Canadian. I was glad to have met him before I saw his show because I was so often disappointed that “nice” guys like David usually had weak shows while assholes (like me) seemed to have the “great show” market cornered. This was not the case with this kid. He was green sure, but he had thought about every aspect of street performing before he adopted any sidewalk as his own. The guy had success written all over ... you just couldn't see all of it because half of him was covered with these little black squares.

Man, I thought I had it bad with the butterfly thing but this guy had everything he owned and most of what he saw checker-boarded. It was a very catchy logo and quite appealing in the beginning. Somewhere along the way though, year after year, as he added postcard, after sticker, after pin to his performing package then ... well, let's put it this way, I can't even play chess any more without becoming nauseated. The guy even sent me a fuckin' mouse pad with his logo on it ... I used it only once, to wipe my ass.

Well, I won't belabor you with the details of the festival, all I can say truthfully, is that we all rocked big time and made more money than god. I was pretty sure David spent an equal amount of time networking as he did performing, so no matter what the outcome, his species would survive.

Over the years, David wasn't as lucky with women as the rest of us. Most girls who go for buskers want free beer and wild sex, or at least that's been my experience. Discussing headshots and promotional materials might get you laid by some skank in LA but those Canadian winters are mighty long and mighty cold (I hear).

David had this one girlfriend who, when you saw them together, you initially thought ... "Wow, what a perfect couple". She had polka dots all over all everything and was every bit as much "the Polka Dot Gal" as he was the Checkerboard Guy. I forget her name but she seemed OK, OK, until you heard the bitch laugh anyway. Unbelievable that laugh! Singularly, the most obnoxious laugh ever devised by a larynx. It crawled up your spine and reverberated like nails scraping across a blackboard. Jesus, and they were both such nerds too ... lovely couple, really.

Over the years, David and I found ourselves booked into the same venues a lot. Canada, in those days, didn't have much more than Edmonton (with Halifax following quickly) but there was a whole world (literally) of street performing festivals popping up in the States and Europe, so I'd run into him a lot.

I watched his act develop over the years into a powerhouse. Very original crowd drawing techniques, coupled with excellent comedy lines and solid juggling technique catapulted him right to the A list of street performers.

The only differences between David and the other top acts I knew was his ability to not get so drunk that you pissed in your own prop case instead of Gazzo's (yes, that was me).

When the www started getting popular in the mid-'90's David started to salivate. He created his Checkerhead.com website with the idea that listing the contact info. for all the street performers in the world would make it easier for the IRS to find the thieves and bust them ...leaving more work for him.

David, like myself, found love in Japan. The main difference between our wives is that his wife came with Art Land's database; mine just came with an attitude. Art Land was one of Japan's 1st event companies to book street acts and Emiko, his wife, was the real brains of the outfit. David obviously fell in love with the girl, not the contacts, but I bet after so many years of marriage (and two kids) he has to look at his balance spreadsheet before he gets an erection. He might just be the most successful (richest) street performer I know ... but remember, it's Canadian money and that don't really count.

So, here is the story ... with just a tad more set-up:

I'm doing my street show in Vancouver B.C. in front of the library. It's a good crowd, all sitting on the steps like good little Canadians (they are so cute aren't they?). I'm not raging yet but I'm slowly getting there (one must take one's time with Canadians). When, all of a sudden, this antique Taxi (yep, you guessed it, a bonafide Checker Cab) pulls up right on my pitch.

WHATTHEFUCK???

I whirl around to slay this motherfucker and who's little smiley face pops out but Checkerhead's (we all call him this because he wasn't able to get the proper domain name ... musta killed him, I bet). Beaming from ear to fuckin' ear, David bounces over and says, "Hi!" Now, I don't want to hurt the little Canadian's feelings and I know you can't just kill them anymore and get away with it, like in the old days, so I kinda smile back.

Then David announces that, "The Butterfly Man and I are going to team up and do a two man show!"

WAAAAHATTHEFUCK??? (squared)

He proceeds to pull out all his shit from the trunk of the cab including his brand new “toy”, a motorized skateboard (how many things have “boards” anyway?).

The show goes so so because we had neglected to discuss status (like He knew) and we come to the finale ... the only important part since it will affect the hat. He tells me to lie on the pavement (what?) and starts to stick soaked fire torches in every orifice he could find. Luckily, I was on my back.

Then he lights the three torches (two armpits and between the, ahem, legs), puts a teeny ramp on either side of my stomach and gets on his little motorized death machine. Like an angry little bee, he starts buzzing around me with near misses. Honestly, I thought about killing the little weasel right then and there but I needed the money and there were too many witnesses (isn't that ALWAYS the case).

He goes for the final jump (I believe that would be ME) and misses the fuckin' ramp with the back wheel and lands right on my nuts.

WAAAAAAAHAHATTHEFUCK??? (cubed)

Somehow we finish ... he gives me the whole hat and runs off to do his high paying P&E gig. I tried to call the cops and report a hit and run but then I remembered that I was American and Canadian cops don't give a shit unless beer, pot or Tim Horton's is involved.

Flash ahead maybe 5 or 6 years.

Halifax has been taken over by “The Cunt”. “He who shall remain nose less” is still there but no longer in charge (of even his own bladder). He still comes down to the pitch sites every now and then wearing the same clothes he wore when Buskerfest was just starting... each year they got looser and looser.

In the now 15-page contract she sends out for Buskerfest, “The Cunt” lists several “Sponsorship” shows required from each act, so, I

imagine, she can squeeze out a little more blood for personal nourishment.

David and I are both listed to perform on the same night. Naturally, it's a weekend, so we both were really looking forward to making nothing. I take the emcee spot and David says he'll close. Show starts at 8 pm ... be there or die.

Show starts ... no David ... OK, no big deal ... many acts to go on ... I'm not worried ... he's a pro!

The show is for Labatt's beer who had generously donated free beer to the festival. This translates to \$1/bottle when offered to the street acts ... now you know why she's "The Cunt". So I start the show and every time someone misses a trick or there's a break between acts, I take the stage and make jokes while drinking copious amount of beer (free if they have it on the tables in the audience). I don't notice the time.

All of a sudden, there are only two acts left before David ... Joe Joe (a newbie 1st time busker, who was so eager he made me puke, and then Nagoma (or somesuchshit) an eclectic band from wherever.

Joe Joe takes the stage and is in trouble right away ... I step in to add to the mix and he and the audience seem relieved. After he (read we) finishes, I hustle him off with words of encouragement (like get a fuckin' job). It's now 9:30, I'm plastered and no David.... Fuck!

The band has already set up behind us so they start playing. I start drinking Labatts much more seriously while staring at a clock. Tick, tick, tick, "I'm gonna kill that motherfucker" ... "where the fuck is he?" Tick tick tick, I just know he's doing a show somewhere ... money grubbing prick ...I'll kill the bastard...tick tick tick ... swear to god, I will ... tick tick tick.

The band finishes leaving the equipment onstage ... I take the stage for the last time ... everybody is sick of me by now ... I'm sloshy drunk, my words garbled, my fly open. I am about to call this thing a wrap when lo and behold with an amazing 27 second left to go, David shows up.

Into the tent with his little fuckin' checkerboard case and his little fuckin' checkerboard scarf and his little fuckin' checkerboard sneakers comes the sheepishly grinning Checkerboard Guy, soaking fucking wet with a huge sack of money in his fuckin' checkerboard bag ... the only thing about him that's not little.

I don't wait for him to get ready ... I don't let him set up shit .. I announce the dickhead as soon as I see his little squinty checkerboard eyes (they probably are, I never got that close).

Well, wouldn't you know it, he make his entrance seamlessly... takes command of the stage ... and his delivers a smooth, polished to perfection performance. A jackoff, yes, but a professional one.

Like I said ... I was already drunk ... I didn't give a shit anymore ... my job was done ... so now it was time to get high. I stepped out near the latrines and got even more fucked up than I already was. All these years, and the smell of shit still gives me the munchies.

I re-enter the tent just as fuckerhead's starting his finale´ ... he climbs a freestanding ladder and juggles clubs ... whoop de doo! So what if he catches them from the crowd ... hell, I do that .. in fact, I used to be the ONLY ONE DOING THAT.

I pass by my prop case on my way to watch his finish and I spy the three pre-soaked torches I had ready for the finale´ in case the jizz swiller never showed. A nasty gleam came into my eyes. Each time he throws a club out, I brazenly walk up to each volunteer and replace it with a fire torch ... I get laughs the whole way, from everyone except Aiken.

I see a fire extinguisher next to a tent pole and grab it. I walk right up to center stage, kneel at the base of his rocking ladder and smile up at him. His eyes tell me a whole story in those two seconds ... and I liked what I saw.

He continues on fearless ... him on a standing ladder 10 feet in the air ... fire torches in the hands of volunteers ... me immediately below with the fire extinguisher.

Catch #1 ...perfect throw ... Jesus, how'd that guy do that?

Second throw ... off a bit but David catches it (albeit on the wrong end, which just gets a laugh).

Damn, I'm thinking ... I hope the prick misses this last one.

He doesn't ... he catches the 3rd toss and starts juggling the three torches... the crowd roars with approval.

This is what happened next:

I'm looking up at this flaming spectacle, hating the fact that this guy had punched out two or three shows while I was in this fucking tent jacking off. This prick was also wowing this audience with his skill and talent.

I'm thinking, "Stop applauding ... stop cheering ... HE HAS SINNED!"

What happened next, I don't take responsibility for ... I should, but I don't... something just came over me ... I really don't know how it happened ... I mean, I just had the fire extinguisher in my hand for safety sake... next thing I knew... I push the handle.

Beautiful, billowing clouds of white powder shot out from the nozzle ... huge plumes of minute white toxic dust engorge everything in its path.

I think about stopping, but I don't ... I continue to spray until the canister is empty.

David gets swamped by the blast... but he doesn't fall ... the torches go out and he completely disappears from view. We were less than 3 feet away from each other when the last blast of powder sputtered out. I couldn't see shit, just white ... everything white.

There had been quite a commotion when I started spraying but I really didn't know what went on ... I was too busy fucking up this guy's show to notice.

Little by little, my sight came back. The first thing I saw was David ... white from the top of his checkered head to the tip of his checkered toe. White ... all white ... everywhere, everything everything except the audience ... they had all split. David and I

were alone ... over 300 people had exited that tent in the time it took for that extinguisher to empty.

Casperboard Guy is still on the ladder gently rocking to and fro as I stand up and look around. I freak that the place has turned into a ghost town ... literally.

David slides down the ladder and gives me a look I'll never forget ... not just because he was mad as hell but because of his eyelids ... every time he blinked, I'd see these two white dots where his eyes used to be.

He never said a word to me ... he just packed up and left.

The band, whose instruments and sound equipment now looked like miniature Kilimanjaros weren't quite so cordial.

FYI: the "Cunt" never said a word to me either.

After all, she knew David was my friend.

Still is.