

From the book, DON'T SHOOT! I'M THE GUITAR MAN

By Buzzy Martin

© 2007 Buzzy Martin

<http://buzzymartin.com/>

The Land of Lunatics: H-Unit

February 9, 1999.

I have had a few weeks off due to paperwork and switching class from the Main Block to H-Unit. But now everything is in place. Plus my prison green card has arrived so I can come and go by myself.

H-Unit looks fucking crazy. It's the Land of Lunatics. These are inmates who have served out most of their time already and only have two or three years left. H-Unit looks like a really big dog cage with lots and lots of barbwire to keep everyone in. I thought, "This is going to be a wild ride." It floors me how big this prison is and what a symbol of lost hope it is. When I first entered the backside of the Q, I saw a bunch of old brick buildings and factories. And, of course, razor-sharp barbwire fencing and officers with guns everywhere. I have been told the Q is one of the oldest prisons in the United States. I have also been told San Quentin houses about six thousand inmates plus five hundred sitting on Death Row.

The Q has its own electric power, water, everything; it is self-contained. If the Q loses power, it has its own generator. It is a City of Denim. From the parking lot, H-Unit looks huge. The prison dorms are made out of brick and aluminum with about one hundred and fifty inmates to a building. Most of the staff calls H-Unit Camp Quentin. H-Unit has five checkpoints that everyone has to go through in order to be let in or out.

Mind you, that is after being cleared from the east gate entrance. H-Unit looks very intense with officers at their posts holding guns, while they are walking back and forth. I could hear the guard dogs barking in the background. As I got closer I could see inmates playing basketball, working out, or just hanging out talking. I am getting a feeling in my gut like I am about ready to be eaten by a bunch of wild dogs in a great big cage.

The contrast with the backside of San Quentin is stunning. Staff houses line the hillside with their great 1950's retro look. Kids and dogs are running up and down the streets of the prison grounds. What a way of life growing up in the shadow of San Quentin prison. Watching baseball games being played by the inmates on the weekend from your front porch. Hoping no inmates will get mad and try to kill another inmate over a bad call from the other team. Or, wonder if someone will try to hit another inmate with a baseball bat over something stupid. What a place to bring up kids. How about when someone asks, "Where do you live?" What a shock your friends are in for when you ask, "Do you want to come over for lunch? The view of the Bay from my front porch is great, postcard perfect."

I get asked a lot, "Am I afraid of any inmates fucking with me while working in the prison?" My reply has always been, "When one is dealing with a wild pack of dogs and they show you their teeth and bark a lot, you cannot show any fear back. Be strong; show lots of respect. If you do not fuck with them, chances are, they will not bite you; get the picture?"

As I arrived at the first checkpoint of H-Unit, I was greeted by two big officers, one black and the other white. They checked my guitar case, checked me out and then cleared me. One of the officers asked me if I had the whistle with me because from now

on it's going to be my body guard and best friend while teaching music here at H-Unit. As I am filling out all the paperwork, the officer behind the desk says to me with a grin on his face, "Hope you have a safe night in your music class. Keep your eyes open and good luck, son." Boy that made me feel like dancing. As I entered the inside of H-Unit I had to walk by ten inmates standing in a line waiting to use the prison phone for their monthly call home. I noticed a couple of cute 'ladies' standing there in the line talking to each other but checking me out. As I got closer, I began wondering what in the hell were these ladies doing in H-Unit? Then it hit me. Hello! They are not ladies. They are inmates that look and act like women. One of them blew me a kiss. And said, "Hey pretty boy, show me your guitar. Maybe you could sing us a love song." My first real dose of prison life in H-Unit and I have only been here three minutes. As I reached the main yard at H-Unit a big white bad-looking tattooed inmate yells from across the yard at me, "Hey Peter Frampton, play us a song; "Show Us The Way, rock-n-roll boss, party on" as he gave me two thumbs up.

Before I could catch my breath, two Arab looking inmates wearing turbans approached the two officers, chanting something about Mohammed and me. They were trying to tell the officers and me what we should be doing to change our lives. Hello? Who's in prison?

Once I arrived at the main officers' post inside H-Unit I felt a little better. But not much. Every inmate in H-Unit was giving me a look, like I had just dropped in from another land. The main officer on night duty introduced himself and told me that he was getting ready to retire in a few weeks. He was moving to Florida and really looking forward to leaving this shit hole of a place. He told me that he had been working here at

the prison for about fifteen long hard years and has seen his share of unhappy times. With a big laugh he said, "Fifteen years is a long time to work anywhere; but add in San Quentin Prison to the list, it will make any man go mad. I kid you not."

I cannot really blame the man; fifteen years of working in a prison would make anyone nuts. The officer told me I must be a ballsy guy because no one has ever done a music program here at H-Unit. This is the very first time. "Good luck; because you're going to need it." Because it is a new class, all the staff at H-Unit is a little jumpy and nervous. The class will be held in the officers' conference room that is used for all the staff meetings. As I was talking to an officer I heard, "music class will begin in ten minutes," blasted over the speakers. "Well, good luck tonight," the officer, said. If anything happens just use your whistle or start yelling. Someone will help you." So there I was in H-Unit waiting for my students to show up for class.

One by one, inmates started coming into the hall, lining up so they could be given the okay to go to class with me. The office complex in H-Unit felt cold, sterile and smelled really clean, like the strong scent of Pinesol. The lighting overhead was bright and it gave off a mild hum. The floors were the cleanest I have ever seen.

I ended up having eight students. A couple of the white inmates looked like pirates to me. One was missing his front four teeth and the other was wearing a black patch over his right eye. Both inmates had loads of tattoos all over their bodies. The Mexican inmates all looked pretty young except for one student. He had to be about sixty years old and never smiled. These inmates in H-Unit seem much more intimidating than the inmates on the Main Block. They have a 'fuck you' attitude. The inmates in H-Unit

will eventually be released, unlike the inmates on the Main Block. I think that is where the attitude comes from.

Once inside the Conference Room, the inmates were told to behave themselves or else. I wondered what the hell “or else” meant. The officer then locked the door telling me that he would be back in two hours. “Good luck” the officer said as he was walking away.

Everyone is telling me good luck. That is all I have been hearing for the last half an hour. After the officer left the room one of the inmates looked at me and said, “I play the guitar five hours a day, seven days a week. I want to learn to play the Blues. Can you show me some blues boss?”

“Sure,” I said. “No problem. Do you sing?” I asked each inmate about their experience singing, and playing the guitar. About half the class knew something about music; the others just wanted to learn anything they could. Every inmate’s guitar needed strings put on. So after thirty minutes of unwinding and winding strings, the class was ready to rock. As I taught these inmates their first song, Bob Seger’s “Old Time Rock n Roll” I could feel a very heavy vibe in the air. No one was smiling. So I said, “Who can sing this song?” I would like to have one of you sing the song. Who is it going to be?

That broke the ice. Two inmates looked up at me, smiling like sweet little boys being given the gift of a big bag of candy. A black inmate with arms the size of my legs smiled at me and asked, “Can I sing first? Is that possible, boss?” Now another inmate says, “I’ve never sang before, but if it’s okay with the other students, I’d like to give it a try after Marvin Gaye. What do ya think, can we go through the song a couple of times or what?”

After three times of going through the Seger song, it began to take shape. I had each student sing a verse and then everyone sang the chorus. Just then, yet another inmate told me he played the bass guitar. Without saying another word, he picked up his guitar and started thumping out bass lines on the first two strings of his guitar. We all sat there listening to this black inmate with our mouths hanging open while he played the bass lines to the Tower of Power song “What Is Hip” note for note.

My first thought was I would like to be in a band with this guy. He lays down a mean, heavy groove. The problem was he is an inmate in San Quentin Prison and did not get here by being a nice fellow that’s for sure. At eight forty-five the officer came back to the conference room, unlocked the door and announced, “The party’s over for tonight. Wrap it up; get your paperwork, guitar and butts in gear. Bed Count is in fifteen minutes.” With a big sigh of relief, I said, “Great job tonight, gentlemen. Remember to practice.” At that point I felt a little better about my new class and a little sad about my old classmates at the Main Block. I kind of missed those guys.

I am starting to feel and see the subculture of the inmate’s way of life here in the different sections of the Q. It’s sinking in fast at H-Unit. It’s in the air everyone breathes; it’s also in the ground that we walk on, the feeling of deep despair that will never go away. There is too much pain in this place. It is the land of broken dreams and lonely hearts.

I decided to not wait for an escort tonight. I thought I could walk back to the main officer’s post by myself. The two-minute walk across the main yard felt like it took ten hours or more. I was scared shitless walking alongside all those bad ass looking inmates. I wanted to throw up or run. But knew I could not do either. Catcalls, inmates blowing

me kisses, it's a sick and creepy life style. Once I got back to the main officer's post to be checked out, I was shaking from head to toe and my shirt was drenched from sweat. But I was alive. Hallelujah! I will never be that stupid ever again to walk alone through the prison yard at H-Unit without officers on each side of me. What the hell was I thinking? I must be crazy.

These inmates at H-Unit have their own style of talking: everything in prison is slang. They have their own code of living and dying. As far as crime in prison goes, it happens all the time; you just have to wait until it is your turn. As I was walking to my truck I noticed a place the staff and the inmates call "The Ranch." All inmates at the Ranch can walk around pretty freely. There are no bars, no cells, and no barbwire fencing. But, yes, those officers in the guard towers are always watching. Their guns are always ready to shoot. The inmates at the ranch just cannot cross the yellow dotted line. Only staff can. With five lookout posts, none of these inmates can run far.

Driving home I remembered those two black inmates who looked like cute ladies blowing kisses at me with their high cheekbones and their long fingernails. Their breast size had to be at least a "C" cup. They were even dressed like women. Their prison shirts were tied to show cleavage. I was told by one of the officers that those inmates are called "sugar shorts" by the other inmates. It is way too strange for my mind to comprehend. And to think some of the kids I am working with in Juvenile Hall cannot wait to end up living here.

These kids keep telling me that I don't understand. They will be okay, no one is going to hurt or fuck with them; they will be kicking it with their home boys; they will be safe; it's okay, do not worry. The truth is it will make them grow up really fast and very

old all at the same time. Have it, live your life as an inmate locked up in San Quentin Prison. Just remember one thing: Never sleep with both eyes shut, never.