

America Unchained

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Extract

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AMERICATM
UNCHAINED

Chapter 1

On your marks...

‘Open wide,’ said the doctor, taking a good long look at the back of my throat. ‘Hmmm. You’ve been using your voice a lot, haven’t you?’

‘Yeb,’ I said. I tried to tip my head back a bit more to help the build up of saliva to escape. When your tongue is fighting a losing battle against something that looks like a lolly stick but is, apparently, a tongue depressor, swallowing is difficult and only gravity can help. ‘Sebber obe a ee or aw uns.’

‘Seven shows a week?’ said the doctor, his voice rich with concern, ‘that’s a lot.’

‘Or aw uns!’ I repeated, keen that he understood the seriousness of the situation.

‘For four months? Whew... what kind of show is it?’

‘A on a oh.’

‘Well, no wonder you’ve done some damage,’ he said. He removed the depressor and the mirror from my mouth. My jaw ached. ‘A one-man show will do that to you, especially with a schedule like that. I’m afraid you have a nodule.’

‘A nodule?’

The word rattled around the back of my head. I searched my memory for something nodule-related. Nodule? The word was lurking there, for sure. Wasn’t it nodules that threatened Elton John’s career? ‘That sounds very serious,’ I said, trying to be as brave as the Rocket Man but still wincing in anticipation of the yet-to-be-revealed implications.

'Excuse me?'

'I said that it sounds very serious.'

'Oh, right. Sorry, I think your English accent threw me,' said the doc, a man who could successfully interpret the half-formed grunts of a man whose tongue he was wrangling but not the *actual* words of an Englishman. 'Basically a nodule is a callus on the back of the throat. You've got one and it's cracked; it's an open wound. So it hurts. I can give you something to alleviate the pain in the short term. It will still hurt. If you perform tonight you will make it worse but you won't do any permanent damage. But afterwards you need to rest your voice. How many shows do you have left on this tour?'

'Just tonight.'

'Well then, your last show is going to be painful. After that, I recommend you don't talk for a few days. Keep hydrated. Avoid alcohol and anything that dries you out.'

'Like flying?'

'Yes. Like flying.'

'That's going to be hard,' I said. 'I fly home tomorrow.'

'Seattle to London?' he asked. I nodded. He grimaced. 'I'll give you some lozenges. But mainly, you need rest. How long before you're on stage tonight?'

'Half an hour.'

A few days later I found myself ignoring the medical advice by taking my nodule out for a few drinks. It was unwise but it seemed rude not to. After all, the BBC was throwing me a welcome home party so the least I could do was enter into the spirit of things.

To spare my blushes nobody was referring to it as the 'Welcome-Dave-back-from-a-four-month-tour-of-the-States Party'. Instead it was referred to by the codewords: 'The BBC Radio Light Entertainment Christmas Party'. They'd even printed that phrase on the invitations, bless 'em, but I knew what we were really there for and I was flattered.

To help with the subterfuge they'd invited a whole load of people that I'd never even met – many of whom seemed to have

connections with BBC Radio Light Entertainment – but amongst the couple of hundred people there, there must have been a dozen or so close friends and colleagues.

Most of my conversations that day started in the same way: ‘Hey, you’re back from the States,’ Chris, Carl, Dunc, Carrie, Dutch, Gert, Smudger, Tush, Jo or Joe would say. ‘How was the tour?’

‘Great,’ would say I, because that’s what you say in that situation. ‘Really great. So... what have I missed? Give me the gossip.’ And our conversations would meander on from there.

‘Hey, you’re back from the States,’ said a voice. I turned to see the smiling face of Geoff McGivern.

Geoff is an actor. He’s the kind of man whose face you recognise without being able to pin down exactly where you know him from and if you’re a keen listener to Radio 4 the same is true of his voice. He’s been in loads of stuff but is nowhere near as famous as his talent merits. He’s in his fifties but he has a glint in his eye that belongs to a much younger man. He’s a brilliant presence on a stage and a warm and garrulous presence in a bar too. He’s also... well, a touch eccentric, evidenced by the fact that he lives full-time in a hotel in King’s Cross – a part of town where hotel rooms are more likely to be rented by the hour. I’d met Geoff fleetingly on a couple of occasions and always been enthralled by him but I wouldn’t have expected him to remember me.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I’m back. What have I missed? Give me the goss, Geoff.’

‘I’ve been reading your column in the *Guardian*,’ he said, which I hadn’t missed and wasn’t gossip.

While I’d been touring the States I’d been contracted to write a weekly tour diary of sorts for the *Guardian* newspaper. Geoff leant in towards me as if he had something secret to divulge. ‘You’ve been having a *fucking* miserable time, haven’t you?’

I stared at Geoff in disbelief. I wanted to hug him. I had indeed been having a miserable time. What’s more, I’d spent most of the miserable time lying to myself and to others about it, telling everyone that everything was fine, burying the

underlying unhappiness a little deeper each time. I'd even spent the last couple of hours telling a number of close friends that it had been '*Great. Really great*', but somehow Geoff – a man I barely knew – could see through me.

When I'd been writing those columns I'd made a conscious effort not to put in any whining. I was aware that I was in a very privileged position: I was being paid to travel the world, performing a one-man show that I'd written and directed, so being a grump about it didn't feel seemly.

The truth was that I'd had a big falling out with the tour's promoters very early on and that for four months we had then had to work together without really wanting to. There wasn't any glamorous side to this tour, just badly thought-through travel arrangements, largely unpleasant hotels and a lot of ill will between me and the people I was working for. I didn't think *Guardian* readers would want to know about this. After all, they had muesli to eat on a Saturday morning and that's hard enough to swallow as it is.

So instead I'd pitched each article as a quirky but affectionate view of our American cousins. I didn't discuss the work side of the tour at all if I could help it. Instead I would spend a few hundred words discussing the architecture of American sandwiches or the curious appeal of their impenetrable sports.

'How on earth did you know that?' I asked Geoff, slightly frightened by his mystic powers. 'I *was* having a miserable time but I was really trying not to think about that when I wrote those columns. I thought I'd hidden all the misery.'

'Oh it was there,' said Geoff. 'Between the lines.'

I looked him in the eye. The glint was there but it wasn't the glint of a younger man... it was the glint of a wizard.

Again I wanted to hug him. This time, I did.

'Tell me all about it,' said Geoff comforting me with a gentle pat on the back of the head. Then, with a whisper, 'But go easy on your voice. It sounds like you have a nodule.'

Over a couple of glasses of white wine I poured out my recent woes to the wise and wonderful Wizard McGivern. I told him about the tour's behind-the-scenes arguments, the assumptions made (by both parties) and the realities then discovered. I explained the loneliness of life on the road: thousands of miles from home without anything other than the most fleeting of friendships to sustain you, and I explained the things I'd done to get through the days and keep myself sane. (I played a lot of crazy-golf in Aurora, Illinois. I dare say I even got quite good at it. But crazy-golf was not the answer. It never is.)

'There's more to it than this,' said Geoff sagely, 'so you fell out with the promoters, you stayed in some bad hotels. You've been on tour before, Dave, you know what it's like.'

He was right. Of course he was. He was a wizard. Some of my complaints were particular to this tour but most of them were just the usual grumbles that emerge when you're living life out of a suitcase. But there *was* something else lurking there also. There was a deeper malaise that made those four months in America such an unhappy experience. I had come to a shocking and troubling discovery: I didn't much like America.

Now if you happen to be American, please don't throw the book out of the window just yet. I promise you, I'm on your side.

I'm afraid to say there is a lot of lazy America-bashing in popular culture these days and I have no truck with it. I've seen a few too many bad comedians raising a laugh from a British audience by characterising Americans as a bunch of idiots who have dismantled the English language and are devoid of irony – none of which is true.

How on earth could America have incubated the comic minds responsible for *The Simpsons*, *Seinfeld*, *Larry Sanders*, *South Park* and *Spinal Tap* (and that's only the S's) if it *was* the land that irony forgot?

Every time I hear this trite non-observation trotted out I want to apologise to my American friends. Hell, I'll even apologize because, do you know what, the 'i-z-e' ending is the original

spelling. Americans are still doing it the way it was when we parted company and it's we Brits who have changed the language. 'Soccer' is a word that started in the English public school system – bizarrely, as an abbreviation for *Association Football* – so you can blame posh English kids for that one and don't even get me started on the 'pants' debate.

Americans clearly 'get' irony, they just don't tend to use it quite so often in day-to-day conversation because, unlike us Brits, they aren't afraid to say what they actually mean and will happily discuss emotions. (Incidentally, if you ever accidentally find yourself in a comedy club and hear the *America = Zero Irony* equation being traded for a laugh, take a good look at the people laughing loudest. They're probably wearing blue jeans and Nike trainers. Ironic?)

Over the last few years I've spent quite a lot of time in the States and I've normally enjoyed it. On two separate occasions I have lived in New York for a three-month stretch and I've never failed to adore that city. I've learnt to love Los Angeles too over the years. It took several short stays there to work it out but slowly it has revealed its charms.

The trouble is, New York and LA don't really tell you what life in the rest of America is like. To judge America on those two cities alone is to admire a man's bookends without reading any of his books.

I had been to other parts of the States too, but only really to big cities and even then, only on such brief stays as to be meaningless. This tour however took me to smaller towns and for longer durations. Even so, it still took me a while to identify what it was that felt wrong about the place. Then one night, through a camera lens, it suddenly came into sharp focus.

Photography has become something of a serious hobby for me. It is, I believe, the perfect pastime for the solo traveller. If you are feeling lonely, a hotel room is only going to intensify that feeling. Propping up a bar by yourself does pretty much the same thing, only with the disadvantages of having liquid

depressives on tap. Photography gives you an excuse to be somewhere else, it can be done at any time of the day and it makes perfect sense – in fact, it’s better – if done alone.

So there were many occasions when, awake at 3 a.m., the stage-adrenaline still coursing through my veins, I would take my camera and tripod, jump in the hire-car and go off in search of something interesting to photograph.

In LA one night I had decided to take photographs of motels. Not just any old motels, no, motels designed in the architectural style known as *Googie*. You might not be familiar with the term but I guarantee you have seen a few Googie buildings in your time and if you weren’t just a little bit charmed by them I don’t believe you have a pulse.

Basically Googie describes the kind of buildings that look as if the space age cartoon family the Jetsons might have lived in them. It’s full of bold angles, cantilevered roofs, fins, bubbles, domes, starbursts, boomerangs, bold signs, bright colours and pop-culture imagery designed to grab the attention of passing motorists. Seattle’s famous Space Needle is as Googie as things get, it just looks like a flying saucer and that’s that. It’s what American coffee shops, bowling alleys, car washes and motels all seemed to look like in the 1950s and ’60s and I think it’s pretty darned dandy.

Just as so many American cars of the post-war era were adorned with tailfins and other space-rocketesque stylings, buildings too reflected the mood of the day. The mood – I wasn’t there so I’ll have to assume – was optimistic. You don’t need to be a psychologist to work out that a building that reminds you of a space rocket is looking to the future.

Every now and then as I explored a small American town I would alight upon some all but forgotten Googie gem and happily snap away, recording the exotic structure and, perhaps more importantly, keeping me away from my depressing hotel room for a little while longer.

It’s a style that originated in Southern California, and Los Angeles is still one of the best places to find examples. Which

explains why, on this particular occasion, I could be found mooching around the seedy end of La Cienega Boulevard in the early hours of the morning setting up my tripod beneath the flicker of some barely functioning neon signs that looked like they were about to give up the ghost.

The motels I was photographing might have been built in a style that I found genuinely impressive but most were in a sorry state. Many had long ago turned out the lights while others appeared to still be in business but were surely only limping along like a pack of wounded animals wondering which one would be picked off next.

It was then that I realised I was photographing the America I liked and admired but that it wasn't the America I'd been living in. For months I'd been staying in a series of chain hotels. There were Best Westerns, and Comfort Suites, Quality Inns and Howard Johnsons, Fairfield Inns and Best Values and others that I've managed to forget. It doesn't really matter what they were called, they were all so disturbingly alike and their overriding quality can best be described as... *adequateness*.

They all – well, nearly all – provided clean linen and hot water but not much else. In particular they were lacking character, the one quality that these nearly dead Googie motels seemed to possess by the space-age bucket load.

The hotels I was staying in felt like they came out of a kit. As if they'd taken three weeks to build and weren't expected to last for more than 10 years. They provided an identikit experience for the American traveller, ticking the boxes that ensure most people's requirements are met – a percolator in your room, a running machine somewhere in the building and Internet access at a price – but having no soul. Besides, I don't want my hotel room in Green Bay, Wisconsin to feel just like the room I stayed in, in Aurora, Illinois... I want it to have some uniquely Green Bay quality to it.

The America I grew up admiring from afar seemed to be a place where anything was possible. Anyone could pursue a goal, set up a business, make it work and feel proud of themselves. Is

that as possible to do now as it once was? Can a regular guy set up a hotel and compete with the budget chains, for instance? How easy is it for a local coffee shop to thrive when a new Starbucks opens somewhere in America every five nanoseconds? In the time it's taken you to read this sentence 83 Starbucks have been opened. Probably.

You don't notice these things so much in the big cities. Of course, New York is teeming with Starbucks and McDonalds, The Gap, HMV and all the other global chains you'd expect to see but it seems to have everything else as well. In a city with a population of eight million people I suppose even the most niche of businesses appears to be sustainable. However, if you reduce that population by a factor of 50 it obviously gets harder – and perhaps impossible – to survive.

I started to wonder how many old-fashioned, independent businesses *were* surviving in small-town America. Maybe they were out there... maybe they were just harder to find? Maybe I just hadn't seen them? Or maybe they were no longer there? Would my tour have been possible without the major chains? Could I have found places to stay, places to eat, drink, caffeinate and be entertained without handing my dollars over to The Man™?

A plan started to form. I wanted to know if it was possible to live life in America without the chains. But more than that, I wanted to do America on my own terms. I'd spent four months on tour there feeling like an indentured slave; going wherever I was sent and doing whatever I was told. I wanted to put an end to this. I wanted to go home and put it all behind me. But then I wanted to return and do things differently. I wanted to believe that the America I'd recently experienced was just the plastic veneer it had seemed to be and that if I looked a little deeper I would find the real America, an America of substance.

I wanted to find out. I wanted to see if it was possible to live life in America without the faceless chains... I wanted to discover Unchained America.