

PULLING WINGS FROM BUTTERFLIES

- TERCIO DE VARAS -

THE TRUE STORY OF ONE CAPTAIN WHO STOOD ALONE
AGAINST THE ENTIRE AVIATION ESTABLISHMENT

CAPT. MIKE SIMKINS

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By Capt. Mike Simkins

CHAPTER ONE

Erode The Safety Margin

"If I were to remain silent, I'd be guilty of complicity."

Albert Einstein.

Clad in a distressed leather jacket, and the only one in the room who needed to have stood closer to the razor that morning, was Eddie. Pencil and notebook in hand, every scribbled sentence forcefully punctuated. The suits surrounded Eddie, whose choice of attire hinted at his chosen profession.

The closest of the suits was Scadeng. He was sweating like Nixon.

I finally had my opportunity: the moment I had been awaiting for a long and exhausting, eighteen months.

It was the last day in a week-long legal case going head to head against the might of a multibillion-dollar airline.

Representing the airline was a well-respected barrister supported by a legion of Thomas Cook legal and HR advisors. Representing me was a fifty-four-year-old Doc Martens-wearing airline captain who had spent most of his twenties sitting in the back of a transit van touring Europe as a drummer in a loud, post-punk, rock band. Unfortunately, sitting in front of a judge, my mix of experience from paradiddles to pre-flight checklists seemed to count for nothing in this formal and unforgiving environment. At this precise moment the most useful skillset would have been forged, not in a cockpit or sitting behind an oak custom drum kit, but in legal chambers.

The suit sitting next to me, Rob Hunter, was the head of flight safety from the pilots union BALPA. Rob was one of the leading fatigue and medical experts within the field of aviation. However, his appropriate legal knowledge was even more limited than my own.

The judge had just called 'seconds out' and had invited me to continue my cross-examination of the senior director of the airline. I had operated as captain for this airline for the last sixteen years, faultlessly. Sitting in the witness stand was Paul Hutchings, the airline's director of flight operations (DFO). In front of the DFO, the judge and myself were lever arch files. Each file contained over 1000 pages compiled for my case. Page 963 contained the paragraph I needed to nudge, provoke, irritate and generally manoeuvre Hutchings towards. Page 963 was where I wanted him. Page 963 was the 'Tercio de Varas.'

This case was not just about myself. It was not even about my immediate working colleagues. Ultimately the judge's decision would resonate within the entire pilot and flight crew community throughout the country, possibly even the world. It would have a direct effect on the safety of the millions of passengers who entrust pilots and airlines with their families' lives every day of the week.

Where I was sitting there should have been a knowledgeable, experienced barrister able to interrogate and cross-examine any witness who was obstructive or evasive. Where the doctor was sitting there should have been a well-briefed solicitor taking notes and offering support to the superior advocacy skills of a legal professional.

As a youngster, I had played a lot of chess, and this whole case had felt like a multi-layered 3D game played blindfolded and without knowing the rules. For the past four days, I had stumbled while finding my legal feet, working out how all the individual pieces moved. Somehow I was still in the game. Somehow I still had all of my pieces and, at least so far, I had been able to cover any attack by the opposition. Even more amazingly, I had managed to position my metaphorical rook on the opponents back row, and I was now picking off the Thomas Cook pieces in rank order. It felt like I was currently controlling the game, but I knew there was still a long way to go.

Before I continued my cross-examination of Hutchings, I consciously waited a minute or so. Let him contemplate what was about to happen. My pen idly traced the lines of some random text as if deep in thought. The reality was, this was more about setting a scene than absorbing any further information. My thinking had already been done.

Each second that passed would amplify a simple fact that Hutchings had to accept, appreciate and consider. As the DFO of a major airline, he was about to be cross-examined in front of a judge, under oath,

witnessed by two lay legal experts by one of his most senior aircraft commanders.

I let him marinate for a few moments longer in the knowledge that, unlike the previous eighteen months, he would now have to answer *my* questions. No longer, could he say something and then claim he had not said it. No longer could he instruct his subordinates to fire the figurative bullet and claim he knew nothing about the attempted drive-by. No! This time it was me, him and a judge. This time he knew everything that he said throughout my cross-examination would be recorded, analysed, countered and ultimately, judged.

I leant forward and stared at an individual who I should have been working alongside as part of a team. Instead, I was now intent on exposing and then demolishing Hutchings integrity. I held his gaze for a few moments as he shifted uneasily in his chair.

'In your capacity as the director of flight operations for Thomas Cook, can you confirm you are content for your passengers to be flown by pilots that are operating at a level of fatigue that results in the equivalent effectiveness of someone at the drink-drive limit?'

Thomas Cook's barrister sat bolt upright. 'Objection Ma'am!'

The judge looked at me with a wry smile. 'Sustained! Captain Simkins, It is not permissible to ask a leading question.'

I smiled back. 'I apologise ma'am, I am a pilot, not a barrister.'

I could blame my lack of legal etiquette and knowledge for my faux pas and the resulting light wrap on the knuckles by the judge. The point was, I had now communicated to the DFO but, more importantly, the tribunal, the central premise to the last five days of legal argument.

It was a simple question. Is it acceptable for an airline to take action, up to, and including dismissal, against a highly experienced airline captain because he refused to fly an allocated duty whilst so exhausted it would have had serious safety implications to his crew and passengers?

The judge then offered to ask my original question in a more legally appropriate form. I had learned quickly. Being litigant in person did have certain advantages.

The DFO looked uneasy. His usual self-assured demeanour had evaporated quicker than Prince Andrew's sweat. For the first time, he was now *not* playing on home territory. He was no longer controlling the game and no longer calling the shots. For the last few days, he had

witnessed my cross-examination of most of his flight ops management team. Now it was his turn to answer. It was *his* turn in front of the wall.

My original question and the subsequent rephrasing by the judge rested on the significance of a printout provided by the company that predicted a pilot's level of fatigue based on previous duties and sleep patterns. As I had planned, the DFO's answer to my now legally acceptable question left the door wide open for the only medically trained person to have looked at the printout to throw the knockout punch.

Had Hutchings been outmanoeuvred? Was his vision of a united front with his well-disciplined Thomas Cook management disciples, lined up against a single upstart, starting to resemble a house of cards?

Hutchings' own crewing manager, Jane Marsden, already had inadvertently exposed his and the company's view about the risks the airline appeared willing to take with passenger safety. She had little idea of the significance of her comment when she made the unguarded statement: "We cannot avoid operating duties in this zone (levels of effectiveness below the dotted line, i.e. below 77%) due to the nature of the program that we operate."

Rob performed the 'tercio de banderillas'. 'Mr Hutchings, please turn to page 545 in the bundle.' Hutchings began to hunt for the elusive page that the doctor and I already had open on the desk. 'Do you think the level of fatigue, where the trace is in the yellow zone, may endanger the flight?'

Hutchings' answer stunned not just myself, but the entire public gallery. 'This run of duties was not that unusual' before adding 'but I accept that that it could erode the safety margin.'

I looked over at the airline's solicitor, Lindsey Murray. She could not prevent herself from grimacing. This was not good. This was not good at all for a major company that was a household name.

I wrote it down in my notes "Erode The Safety Margin." I boxed it, underlined it, then stared at it and let the full implications of that statement sink in, as I suspected, did the judge and lay members of the tribunal. They were still all wide awake.

It was now time for me to administer the 'Tercio de Muerte'.

'Paul, turn to page 545.' I continued, 'You can see the trace shows that my predicted level of effectiveness for the duty I refused was down at 70%.'

The reply from the DFO produced yet another jaw-dropping moment. 'Yes, but if you look, that is only towards the end of the flight.'

I looked towards the judge, only to find that she, along with both lay members, was busy scribbling down the latest DFO soundbite. The most critical stage of any flight when any mistakes are significantly amplified is the approach and landing phase. Yet here was the DFO of one of the UK's largest airlines attempting to play down the significance of an '*effectiveness*' of seventy per cent because it was only at the '*end of the flight*'.

I delayed the next line; like a child slowly opening a Christmas present, I wanted to savour every second.

'Please turn to page 963 of the bundle, Paul.'

Again the DFO complied. The text came straight from the manual for the software that had produced the printout— the printout upon which Thomas Cook was basing their entire case. I slowly read the text for the benefit of the tribunal.

'In order to provide some guideposts to relate levels of effectiveness to elevations of risk of an error or accident, consider the following. Considering speed of reacting to a signal, effectiveness as low as 70% lengthens reaction time about as much as being legally drunk (0.08 blood alcohol content).'

I hammered this final nail into his and the airline's position. '0.08 blood alcohol content is the equivalent to the drink-drive limit in the UK or four times the blood alcohol content limit for flying.'

'I admit it's not ideal' came the less than ideal, at least from the airline's perspective, reply from Hutchings.

We had already heard from the flight ops management team that my run of duties was by *no means unusual*. So how many more pilots are flying at the effectiveness of that of a drunk driver?

Time to close this out;

'Is it *your* decision or *mine* if I am or if I am not fatigued?'

'Your decision.' Hutchings took a deep breath to launch, yet again, into another long-winded monologue.

I cut him short. I had what I had needed. 'No further questions ma'am.'

Eddie continued to scribble, Scadeng continued to sweat.

CHAPTER TWO

The Music Years

"There is only one person who does more flying than me... And that's the pilots, and I hate it."

Andrew Gold.

What possible twists and turns in life could ever have brought me here? Currently, I'm sitting on a tour bus, having just embarked on a thirty-date European tour, drumming for one of the most influential post-punk bands of all time, all whilst writing about corruption and collusion within the aviation industry?

As I complete each page on a beaten up Mac Book Pro, I take a moment to contemplate this bizarre set of circumstances as the tour bus makes its way between Berlin and Copenhagen. The route between the two cities being no less circuitous than my journey from rock drummer in the 80s to operating as a commander on one of the most advanced aircraft in the world, to then confronting the entire aviation establishment.

But now, here I am, about to drum for the first time in thirty years, in front of an audience of around 1,500 a night for a band who were a significant influence on many artists including Nirvana's Kurt Cobain and Queens of the Stone Age's and Screaming Trees vocalist Mark Lanegan.

If you discount the first sixteen years of my life, this journey began in 1977. It was the heyday of punk music. My most pressing concerns were which brand of medication would cure acne and would sugar water have enough strength to hold my hair in the same style as John Lydon's?

As a spotty, spiky-haired youth, I was now sitting in Ashton

Grammar's sixth-form careers advisor's office. I had been asked what my preferred choice of occupation was.

'Airline Pilot.'

With that, the teacher-come self-professed employment expert rocked back on his chair, took a drag on his pipe, and stared back at the adolescent sat in front of him. His verdict, delivered with an almost un-contained relish was that I did not have a hope in hell. He informed me that during his time as a career advisor, hundreds had sat where I was now sitting. Many had pronounced that they wanted to be a pilot, yet only one had ever made it as far as even being selected as a cadet. Even then, they had only lasted two months at Hamble, the British Airways Training College, before they were 'chopped' as not up to the task. He asked if I had any other ideas.

The lifting inflexion at the end of my next answer for the next stab at a fulfilling career choice probably gave the game away as to my inner lack of belief if this would be possible.

'Drummer.'

'Can you drum?'

My response in the negative did not even warrant an aural response from the nicotine impregnated oracle. The shaking of his head was the only outward sign of any acknowledgement to my answer.

There I was, a sixteen year old, with middling school reports with dreams of the unachievable.

The old cotton mill town of Ashton-under-Lyne did not produce the likes of airline pilots or rock stars. The local comprehensive school where I had spent the first five years appeared to have only two goals. The first, to keep as many jobs off the street as it could for a few hours a day. The second was to train the legions of factory workers that would ultimately operate in some capacity or other in the numerous 'dark satanic' cotton mills dotted around the Lancashire town. There are still a few mills standing that managed to survive the 80's mill cull by celebrity demolisher Fred 'did ya like that?' Dibner.

Somehow I had managed to gain a brace of 'O' Levels after five years at the local comprehensive. A grade 'A' in physics and 'B' in metalwork were the highlights. A position making telescopes, however, never appeared over the horizon.

These academic highs were enough to secure a place at the local grammar school sixth-form.

It was only once I had left the comprehensive and began studying for A levels, did I finally feel my classmates were individuals I could

relate to. Unfortunately, this caused the study to take a backseat to a social life that I had been deprived of for the previous five years. Conversations would centre around the embryonic punk music scene in Manchester, a scene very much championed by a newsreader on Granada, the local TV station. His name was Tony Wilson.

Wilson had managed to sweet-talk the studio owners at Granada into giving him his own music show entitled 'So It Goes'. The reality was, it was the only music show worth watching. It was not the usual dire musical offerings, performed by vapid, grinning, airbrushed puppets, the strings of which were held by some self-appointed musical impresario. This music was produced by young, mostly angry, mostly ugly individuals who had something to say and by God were they going to say it. It was exciting, it was new, but there was more to it than that. *Much* more! It was the mindset of many of those involved that was the biggest attraction. Bands who appeared on Tony Wilson's show included The Buzzcocks, The Sex Pistols, Joy Division, Siouxsie and the Banshees, The Stranglers and The Clash. The groups were filmed playing live in Manchester, with a local poet, John Cooper Clarke, acting as a cleanser of the musical pallet. He was a punk sorbet, mixing social commentary with laser-like humour. Some forty-odd years later, it is wonderful to see John finally get the recognition he has, for so long, deserved.

Along with 'So It Goes', my musical education was supplemented every weeknight from 10:00 pm. The strains of 'Picking The Blues' by Grinderswitch would introduce what many consider to be the most influential radio show to have ever been hosted on the BBC, the 'John Peel Show'. Peel was right there at the forefront of this musical and social movement that punk represented. Along with the bands who were already appearing on 'So It Goes', Peel would play The Dead Kennedys, Talking Heads and Television from the USA. Stiff Little Fingers and the Undertones from Northern Ireland, The Adverts, The Jam along with his all-time favourite band, The Fall.

Stiff Little Fingers were, and still are, fronted by Jake Burns. They were a noisy, poorly- produced punk band that had formed at the height of the troubles in Northern Ireland. During the late '70s, early '80s not a day would go by without news of the IRA murdering a Protestant or member of the police or the UDA killing Catholics. There were also the constant bombings being carried out in Ireland and on the UK mainland. Despite this, Stiff Little Fingers sang about precisely what it was like to grow up surrounded by that level of turmoil and

strife. They made statements in those tracks that many individuals had been shot for saying less, on both sides of the Irish political divide.

These young lads were brave, they were bold, and they were utterly brilliant. They still are. The band's debut album was a history lesson in how it was to be young and defiant when two opposing factions attempting to convince you that their ideas and beliefs were the only right way, the only truth. The factions' methods of persuasion extended to violence, torture and murder.

If I wasn't listening to John Peel's show, I would be sitting upstairs listening on my air-band radio to aircraft inbound to Manchester Airport. I was fascinated and intrigued by the radio exchange between aircraft and ATC (Air Traffic Control);

'Established on the localiser.'

The approach controller would reply;

'descend further with the glide, contact tower on 118.625.'

It all sounded so very technical, so very cool. Alternatively, I was working out which way round to hold a guitar in a feeble attempt to play Bobby Shafto from my 'Tune a Day' guitar book. Given the pace of my improvement, a more apt title would have been a 'Tune a Millennium'.

The first record I ever owned was by The Sex Pistols, the band the establishment loved to hate. They not only recorded one of *the* greatest rock and roll albums of all time but their frontman, John Lydon, was not afraid to say things as they were, even if it was not what the establishment wanted to hear. Maybe that's why they hated him.

Lydon was asked by a BBC reporter, no doubt in an attempt to make him look foolish, who would he kill if he could.

'Jimmy Savile', Lydon replied immediately. 'We all know what he's up to, but nobody is allowed to say anything about it.'

That one comment resulted in the BBC immediately banning any Sex Pistols tracks being played, or even being referred to on the nation's most listened to station.

As anyone who lives in the UK is now aware, it transpired Savile was a prolific, predatory, paedophile. Many at the BBC knew this back in the '70s, but the BBC loved Jimmy.

It later descended into a farce when the Sex Pistols track 'God Save the Queen' reached number one. The BBC redacted the band's name and the title of the record as if it simply did not exist. It might not have existed in the eyes of the BBC, but for many, it opened ours.

The important issue here, for daring to challenge a high profile

member of the broadcasting establishment, Lydon and his band were blacklisted by the only broadcaster who could breathe life into any music career on a nationwide basis. A brave or stupid act of raising an issue that needed to be raised? The fact was, a spotty youth with an aversion to a toothbrush had.

So why would the establishment attempt to suppress the punk movement's figurehead when he spoke out? Surely he should have been applauded. Instead, he was shunned. How many other children suffered because a singer in a band the establishment loved to hate had been silenced? Had they something to hide? Was someone getting too close to the story? The BBC establishment realised someone was going to upset the apple cart and derail that gravy train that just kept on giving to the chosen few.

This was an example of an organisation, in this case, the BBC, turning a blind eye to criminal activity simply because Savile, at the time, was one of its biggest stars. He made the BBC money. Also guilty of looking away were the many charities that Savile had financially supported. What were a few lives ruined if Savile continued to bring in a few million?

Anyone who dared rock the establishment's boat could not be seen to get away with it for fear of others voicing their valid concerns. As for Lydon, he promptly formed the band 'Public Image Ltd' along with ex Clash guitarist Keith Levene and Jah Wobble.

So here I was, sixteen with a love of music but not able to play any instrument and a dream of becoming a pilot without the necessary academic abilities needed. The future did not look too bright.

After my meeting with the 'Yoda' of career advisors, the college had held a 'next step' seminar. The concept was to give suggestions and advice on which courses were open after completing 'A' Levels. British Airways were conspicuous by their absence. There was, however, a very smartly dressed chap. His boots were so reflective it was a pity the engineers responsible for the mirrors in the Hubble Telescope had not taken lessons from him on how to polish.

If I didn't stand a chance of getting into Hamble as a British Airways cadet, maybe I could see if Her Majesty might pay for my flight training if I joined the RAF.

There was, however, a catch.

The shiny-booted officer informed me that because it cost upwards of a million pounds to train each fighter pilot, I would have to serve queen and country for at least twelve years. I would be an ancient man

of thirty by the time I had paid my dues! However, there was an even bigger issue and one that would be impossible to resolve.

The aforementioned Stiff Little Fingers debut single was a track entitled 'Suspect Device'. It contained the line, 'question everything you're told'. This was precisely the mentality that would be drummed out of any aspiring fast jet pilot in the RAF. You were there to follow orders, nothing more, nothing less. When the commanding officer orders you to jump, you jump. The only question allowed to be asked? 'When can I land?'

My analysis of the predicament I faced as a sixteen-year-old was confirmed as correct many years later. A TV documentary followed the highs and lows of RAF pilots. During one episode, a pilot was challenged.

'If your Commanding Officer told you to bomb a village, would you do it?'

After several minutes of side-slipping the question, the pilot finally admitted;

'Well, I suppose I would have to if I were ordered to.'

No, as far as the RAF was concerned, I was certainly not made of the right stuff. Maybe it was just that I thought about things too deeply. Perhaps it was just that I thought about things.

With the dream job being entirely out of reach, upon leaving Sixth Form, I joined the Nat West Bank. Secure employment, cheap mortgage, nine to five working hours with every weekend off. What was not to love about it? Well, pretty much everything. I hated it.

As my record collection began to grow, so did the realisation that life had a lot more to offer than printing cheque-books. I needed to be part of this seismic musical and cultural shift. The only problem was I had not advanced from playing 'Bobby Shafto' on the acoustic guitar. Before punk came along, this inability to play any instrument would present something of a hindrance. With punk, it was not only positively encouraged but also seen as an advantage. Unfortunately, my guitar playing at this stage would have stretched even the boundaries of the punk ethos. There must be another instrument I could play without the limiting restriction of actually having to learn to play it.

My father and I would debate anything, life, music, careers. Some might say, argue. It was definitely debate. Whatever position on any subject one of us would take, the other would present the opposing view.

He knew I was, by now, considering getting a set of drums. They seemed easy to play, just bash about with no need to learn or understand such complicated items as notes and chords. Looking back, I might have given the game away that I was serious in my intentions. With the number of brochures from the likes of Premier, Tama, Pearl and Ludwig regularly dropping through the letterbox, I was not exactly concealing my goal to make a racket.

My father was not ambiguous about his view of his son's musical instrument of choice. 'Not while you're living in this house, lad.' He pointed out that we already had a piano and a battered acoustic guitar.

That was my life mapped out, a career in the bank with no escape. Buy a house on an estate with a cheap mortgage and be shackled for life. There was, of course, crown green bowling to look forward to in my retirement, but there again, I have never looked good in white and a flat cap.

My parents were due to go on holiday, and it was while they were away, the phone rang. It was my friend Keith. Unlike myself, he had managed to secure good grades at 'A' level. He was now studying for a degree at Liverpool University. Keith informed me that Stiff Little Fingers were due to perform at the University. Perfect timing! It was the day after my twentieth birthday, and I could go to the concert and be back, ready for the next stupefying day at the bank.

We arrived at the venue early, the hall already full. Before we knew it, the band were on, and, as one, the crowd began jumping up and down as SLF launched immediately into 'Gotta Get Away'. We both quickly realised it was going to be a hot and sweaty couple of hours. The pounding drums and guitars turned up to the max still could not drown out the angry growl from frontman Jake Burns.

As the crowd jumped, to preserve your front teeth, you had no choice but to follow suit. Not only that, you had to ensure you bounced in sync. If you were out of phase with those around you, you risked a head smashing against your chin and removing gratis, your incisors. Within thirty minutes, we were exhausted, running on pure excitement and adrenaline that only a band at the top of their game can induce.

I noticed hands reaching up at the front of the audience. The drummer was throwing drumsticks into the crowd. One came twisting and twirling through the air in my direction. It resembled a line out in a rugby union game, apart from the fact that due to our

synchronisation abilities, the crowd, mostly, still had all their own teeth. My arm went up, but the stick eluded my grasp. A scramble ensued around my feet. Eventually, a victorious youth in a leather jacket appeared displaying his spoils. Pumped on adrenaline, I announced to Keith that if I managed to grab a drumstick that evening, I would buy a set of drums that weekend. What were the chances of another one coming my way? If I did walk away from the gig with a stick, I would take it as a sign from John Bonham, the great percussionist in the sky, that this was the route I simply *must* take!

Moments later, another stick headed in my direction. This time I was ready. I launched myself skyward, the arc and spin rate of the stick was perfect, hand and wood docked like a Soyuz with a space station. The next time my feet hit the ground, I was the proud owner of a Pro-Mark drum stick. The previous careless owner had been Stiff Little Fingers' drummer, Jimmy Riley.

That moment changed my life. True to my word the next weekend, my bank account was two hundred pounds lighter. It was a bottom of the range bright red 'Pearl Apollo'. It was love at first sight. Within a few short weeks, I had joined my first band.

For the first couple of years, I juggled working full-time at the bank while playing with various bands from the Manchester and Liverpool scene. I eventually joined a group who had a record deal in 1984. The band were Lavolta Lakota, and they were already signed to the highly regarded Factory Records or, to be more precise, Factory Benelux. This was the label formed by the previously mentioned Granada TV personality, Tony Wilson. Factory Records was also the home of Happy Mondays and Joy Division, with Lavolta Lakota signing to the label a few years after the death of Joy Division's singer Ian Curtis. After his demise, Joy Division morphed into New Order. Peter Hook, the bass player with both bands, had not only produced Lavolta's first record but also mixed the live sound whenever we played. Numerous appearances followed supporting the Manchester legends at some of the UK's biggest venues. Meanwhile, I still had to put on a suit the next morning, ready for sitting behind the counter at the National Westminster Bank!

This period presented a huge learning curve and opened my eyes to the 'business' aspect of the music industry.

My first face to face meeting with Hooky was an introduction to the reality of being in such an iconic, ground-breaking and influential band. A band so important, two films have since been made about him

and the rest of his bandmates. The reality is, there was no money in being iconic.

I had been invited down to a bonding session with my new bandmates. The venue was a popular hang out known as the Gallery where a band were appearing from the USA. It was their first UK tour. There was virtually no one there, maybe no more than twelve or so in total. Not long after I walked into the club, Dave, the singer from Lavolta, arrived. With him was Hooky, a man who even now has singularly failed to work out how to shorten his bass strap. At this time, New Order were at the pinnacle of their popularity. 'Blue Monday' was in the charts and numerous TV appearances, world tours and worldwide recognition would ensure the track would become the biggest selling twelve-inch single of all time. Anyone would, quite rightly, assume that Hooky was, therefore, a very well - off individual.

Moments after being introduced, Dave leaned over to ask could I lend the multi-millionaire ten pounds. It transpired Hooky was anything but a multi-millionaire. This fact had resulted in the ATM declining his request for a cash withdrawal. Lesson number one in the music business; fame does not equate to a decent bank balance. It was an industry based on smoke and mirrors.

Years later, I was to discover it was the exact same situation within the aviation industry. An airline will show a handsome pilot walking through the terminal with a bevy of stunning-looking cabin crew to give the impression of high-end glamour and luxury. When you consider, a ten year BMI cabin crew member's salary was £15,000 per annum, and the cabin crew spent most of their time selling duty-free, cleaning up vomit and pouring tea or coffee, it suddenly does not look so glamorous.

Similarly, a record label will attempt to sell to the public an idea of success, intrigue and glamour. Flash cars. Designer clothes. Bands hanging out with the current crop of the great and the good, all with one singular motive in mind, *building the brand image*.

The intended misconception by labels is that when the public see a group on the TV riding high in the charts, the fans automatically assume the members of the group are living an aspirational lifestyle. This financial blessing, however, is rarely ever the case.

Hooky later told me he'd made so little money from Joy Division and New Order, that he had to work as a roadie, loading equipment into the Hacienda just to make ends meet.

Another band who were also starting to breakthrough at the time

who subsequently supported both my groups B.F.G. and Lavolta were the Stone Roses. During their heyday in the late '80s the members, I was reliably informed, were paid fifty pounds a week each. It was not the land of milk and honey that we were led to believe.

To add to the New Order bass player's financial problem was the lack of any apparent business acumen by the label boss Tony Wilson. It cost Factory Records more to produce the biggest selling twelve-inch record in history than they received from the distributor. Every single copy of New Order's Blue Monday that sold, Factory Records and therefore the band, lost 5p. This was entirely due to the brains behind the artwork. Peter Saville had designed a sleeve that resembled a computer floppy disk. The cost of manufacturing these sleeves was so expensive that it made the release uneconomical. Tony Wilson, when told about this fundamental business flaw in catalogue number FAC-73, said, 'well nobody's going to buy it anyway'.

If you are still wondering which American band drew around twelve people to a tiny club in Manchester on 25th April 1984, it was REM. I often wonder whatever happened to them.

As time passed, it became apparent Lavolta were in desperate need of a decent manager to make any headway in the industry. The local social secretary at the polytechnic had expressed an interest in the job. We agreed to meet and discuss the matter further. During the resulting discussion, the would-be manager mentioned that there was a ginger-haired kid from a punk band called the Frantic Elevators, that he was also considering managing. The name of the social secretary was Elliot Rashman, and ultimately, he made the right decision. The ginger-haired kid was Mick Hucknall of Simply Red.

That was the beginning of the end for Lavolta. It had run its natural course. My time drumming for the band contained many unforgettable and some unrepeatably memories. Whilst touring with the likes of New Order and the Cult, I never made any money, no one did. I loved every second of it.

It was at this stage that I had to seriously re-assess my life. Things could not go on like this. I sensed if I remained in the bank, the security aspect would slowly suffocate the life out of me. I had to make a move. In December 1985, without any job to go to, I resigned from the bank.

Fortune, as they say, favours the brave, or the stupid and within a couple of weeks, I had my first big break.

I was approached to drum for the band Wax. This particular group

formed when the lead singer from 10cc, Graham Gouldman, teamed up with the American singer Andrew Gold.

Wax's biggest hit was 'Building a Bridge to Your Heart'. It was about as far away musically as you could get from what I enjoyed listening to; however, it was an opportunity to do what I loved, and that was to drum.

As well as writing such hits as 'I'm Not In Love' and 'Dreadlock Holiday' with 10cc, Graham had also penned the track 'For Your Love' for the Yardbirds, featuring a young Jimmy Page. Page would later go on to form Led Zeppelin. Graham subsequently told me over a beer that he had been the original choice as bass player for the Blues Rock legends.

The other half of Wax was American singer-songwriter Andrew Gold. Andrew was from musical royalty. His father was awarded an Oscar for writing the soundtrack for the film 'Exodus' starring Paul Newman. Compared to his mother; however, his father was a musical also-ran. Andrew's mother performed under the name of Marni Nixon. Those who have seen the films 'West Side Story', 'The King and I' or 'My Fair Lady', you will have heard Andrew Gold's mother singing. Her performances in those films earned her two Oscars. At one point, Andrew showed me a picture of him shaking hands when he was a teenager with four young chaps who had come to his house to meet his parents. It did not take long to realise who the four suited individuals were. Rumour has it that this particular band went their separate ways because of the Japanese wife of one of the primary songwriters.

Andrew, before he formed Wax, also had an incredibly successful solo singer-songwriter career. He had hits with 'Lonely Boy', 'Never Let Her Slip Away', 'How Can This Be Love,' and the signature tune 'Thank you For Being a Friend' which featured on the hit comedy series the 'Golden Girls'.

Before this success, he had also worked with Linda Ronstadt and the Eagles.

Andrew also had one of the coolest claims to fame possible. I was not even aware of this fact until after he died in 2011. One of Andrew's tracks had been used to 'wake-up' the Mars pathfinder Space probe in 1996; therefore, Andrew could claim to be the first human ever to be 'heard' on another planet.

I could not have possibly known this at the time, but that decision to drum for Wax would change the course of my life in an entirely

unexpected way. During the period I was involved, we played numerous television shows throughout Europe, alongside some of the biggest bands of the time. Frankie goes to Hollywood, Depeche Mode, Aha, Simply Red, Elvis Costello and Eurythmics. The most significant appearance we made was at the Montreux Rock Festival. It was televised worldwide and considered the most important music show to appear on.

We arrived in Switzerland via a chartered jet that had taken us from London to Geneva. I shared a bottle of wine with Elvis Costello and his Attractions on the coach from Geneva to Montreux and discussed with Aha's Morton Hackett how a fantastic video had given them their break with, what I considered, one of their weaker tracks. This was all before enjoying the luxury of a suite at the Grand Hotel. Yes, these were heady days. From the Nat West Bank in rainy Droylsden to a view of Lake Geneva from my room in a five-star hotel, all in a matter of weeks, this was more like it.

I still had no money.

Despite the massive television audience of tens of millions, I received the princely sum of £250 for that particular appearance. The truth is, it was such a fantastic opportunity; I would have done it for nothing. What I learned about how the world worked during this period was far more valuable than just a few pounds in the back pocket.

Andrew was hugely experienced within the music business. He was the first person to take the time to explain, in detail, how the industry worked. For that, I will be eternally grateful. He emphasised that to make any money, you had to control the publishing. It was all very well writing and performing the songs, but you also had to control the copyright on those songs. That explained the reason that I made £250 for my appearance on a worldwide syndicated rock show. I had no claim on the copyright on those songs, and that was the rock behind which the big money was hiding.

The next revelation by the official NASA 'waker-upper' was to have an even more significant impact on my life.

Andrew had a phobia. He was terrified of flying, petrified in fact. Over the Alps, during the flight to Montreux, we were hit by lightning. Due to the entire passenger compliment of the BAC 1-11 reading like a who's who of '80s pop stars, the incident instantly became worldwide front-page news. White-faced Andrew said to me 'there is only one person who does more flying than me... And that's the pilots, and I

hate it'.

It was after removing the expletives that had surrounded Andrew's comment, that the significance of what he said hit home. It was while taking a shower, getting ready for that evening's TV appearance, everything became crystal clear. I quickly rationalised that if I could accomplish performing at such a prestigious event within weeks of resigning from the bank, it was absolutely within my power to achieve what the school careers advisor considered impossible.

One of the best aspects of drumming for Wax was the number of flights and the amount of travelling involved. If I was getting such a buzz from playing in bands in front of huge TV audiences, I presumed this would pale in comparison with the experience of flying a £250 million aeroplane with over 300 people on board, all of whom had absolute faith in your abilities and decisions. If I was getting such a buzz from hitting a drum with a stick, surely, it would be mind-blowing to take off and land something weighing more than a house. From that very moment, there was no doubt in my mind that ultimately I would become an airline pilot. Yes, I had no money. Yes, I had never flown an aeroplane in my life before. Yes, my A-level results were dire, and yes, I had no idea how I was going to accomplish it. I just knew I would.

Andrew had sown the seed, but it was going to be some time before I could even contemplate embarking on that particular career diversion. I would need money, lots of it. The issue was, I had not become a drummer to become rich. My simplistic view had been if the money came my way doing what I loved, that was a bonus. I loved what I was doing. I was drumming and travelling.

Working in a bank had taught me one valuable lesson. Never again would I do anything 'just for money'. But now, for the first time in my life, I needed a substantial amount.

After my discussions with Andrew, he made it clear that there was plenty of money in the business. Labels, managers and publishers syphoned most of it before it trickled down to the artist. Maybe if I cut out the middlemen?

With the blueprint Andrew had given me for a healthy, wealthy and wise future within the industry, I duly set about forming Attica Records as a protective shell for my own band, B.F.G. This was the only way I could see of ever making, and keeping, the substantial capital needed to fund any future flight training. I certainly was not going to be able to save that kind of money working in a typical nine to

five job.

I had come up with a crazy idea, based on the punk ideal, that it was more about attitude than the ability to play an instrument. On that basis, I had formed the fledgeling B.F.G. with my old school friend Keith who, by now, had completed his degree. We decided that as the drums were the only instrument that could be reasonably played by either of us, we would, illogically, buy a drum machine. Having no idea about how to play the guitar, I then set about teaching Keith how to play the bass. To complete the 'we haven't a clue what we are doing ethos' Keith and I asked BJ Williams, a music fanatic with whom I used to work with at the bank, if he would join as the singer. My major influences were Lydon's new bandmate in Public Image Ltd, Keith Levene, and the guitarist from the funk-punk Gang of Four, Andy Gill.

Years later, a well-respected American DJ nailed down the resulting noise that we collectively made. "As intense as Joy Division without the depression" was his verdict.

Following all the advice from Andrew Gold, the first single 'Paris/Amelia' was released on Attica Records. It sold out within a couple of weeks. Within a month the 12-inch record was swapping hands for £25.00 on the second-hand market. One individual who bought a copy was a young barrister in Canada. His name was George.

Amazingly we were doing something that touched a nerve with people, while, at the same time, getting *on* plenty of others. Perfect.

I had sent a copy of the single to Hooky explaining that since I had left Lavolta, I had formed B.F.G. I asked him, as we were just starting out, if he knew of any groups who needed a support act. My idea was to break us in slowly. Maybe a pub gig in a dingy bar where we could stumble through a few tracks without too many witnesses to our likely unholy racket. I don't think Hooky was on the same page as I was on the matter. Within the month B.F.G. were playing their first proper concert in front of several thousand people, supporting New Order on their sell-out tour.

I was learning the business as we played. Without a manager, apart from myself, through various line-up changes, we went from writing and rehearsing in an attic above Keith's parents' bedroom (Attica Records) to performing in front of 15,000 people at the Loreley Stadium in Germany alongside Bjork and The Pogues. All this achieved in under three years.

Our follow up single 'Western Sky' was the first recording that

featured the new line-up. As is always the case when a band starts to become successful, it creates a significant dilemma for those members with full-time jobs. It's a dangerous gamble to give up the security of a career, all for the very faint possibility of lasting success as a recording and touring artist. Both BJ Williams and Keith made the very sensible choice that their careers came first. Although this put me in somewhat of a quandary, there was never any ill-feeling over their decisions. I immediately began searching for replacements. I decided that I needed someone who could play the guitar and interpret my ideas along with a new singer and bass player. Western Sky featured Steve on vocals and 'Baggy' Batheram on guitar and a young Irish lad, Joe on bass. Joe would, many years later go on to appear in the band 'Noize' alongside Shepard Fairey, the graphic artist behind the Obama 'Hope' poster and 'André the Giant has a Posse,'

Western Sky managed to attract the attention of a journalist who wrote for one of the most widely-read music papers in the UK, Melody Maker. He had given the track an excellent review in that week's new release section. Seeing an opportunity, I rang him to ask if there was any possibility of, what in effect, would be B.F.G.'s first-ever nationwide interview. He agreed and asked if we had any more material and if so, would we send it down. I duly sent down 'Higher Than Heaven Is', a new track slated to be the next single.

By this point, I was not only writing material. I was also running the record label single-handedly. Add to that I was also managing the band, drumming and, when we recorded, playing additional guitar and bass. I urgently needed to outsource some of the workload. I was, however, not desperate to sign any deal at any cost. If you are desperate, turn around and walk away, it's the first rule of negotiation.

To make the most of my trip from Manchester to London for the interview, I had also arranged to see RCA/BMG, one of the biggest music companies in the world. As I sat in their plush surroundings in Cavendish Square, it was hard not to consider how different the working conditions were for office-based music staff, compared with the average musician. Luxurious big leather seats with Evian water or designer coffee on call for those working at a major music company. Compare this to a Pot Noodle and Vimto for the majority of musicians at the coalface, the ones who generate the music that the industry chews up, profits from and then, ultimately, spits out.

I had waited at least 20 minutes in reception at RCA for the meeting

to commence. Eventually, I was invited up to the hallowed offices of the A&R (Artist and Repertoire) Department. From the cassette of 'Higher than Heaven' leaving my hand, being placed into the tape machine, play button being hit, stop button being pressed, and the recording being back in my grasp, took all of twenty seconds. The female A&R scout spoke. 'It's not really for us at this stage but if you have any more tracks, feel free to send them to us.'

Translated into A&R speak, this means, 'I could have had another ten minutes lunch break, now be a good chap and bugger off'.

Thirty minutes later and I was sat in a pub next to the Melody Maker offices with a journalist by the name of Mick Mercer. Any disappointments from my meeting with RCA swiftly evaporated. Mick informed me that not only did he love the new track that I had sent him, but he thought it was the best thing he had heard all year.

As I sat on the National Express coach on the way back to Manchester mulling over the day's events, I could only hope what Mick had told me would somehow find its way into print if, and when, the interview was published. After all, I had not completed the usual label - journalist transaction of buying him a four-course lunch, wine included, to ensure the inclusion of the interview in any forthcoming issue. I need not have worried.

"This Year's Greatest Independent Single is B.F.G.'s Higher Than Heaven" was the headline when the article surfaced a couple of weeks later. The reputation of the music business is that of a corrupt nest of vipers. In a few instances, this is very true; however, most are in it for the love of the form. Mick Mercer was one of them.

The afternoon that the interview came out, the phone rang. It was the same person who had given me less than thirty seconds of her time in Cavendish Square. The conversation took place many years ago, but it will be forever etched in my memory -

'Hi Mike I have not been able to get that track out of my head that you played me, we would love to come and see B.F.G. play live. When are you next playing?'

I felt no need to be accommodating;

'We don't have any gigs planned.'

'Well, can you not arrange one in London as we would like to come and see you?' A typical opening gambit by a label interested in an artist.

My response was not what the majority of artists would have given.

'Nope, I'm not doing that as it's a lot of effort to go to for you not to

show up.'

She promised that she would but then said, 'Ok, if you don't want to organise a gig, we will come and see you rehearse'. Then she proceeded to recommend some good rehearsal rooms down Holloway Road in London.

I was confident that they were interested and on the hook, but at the same time, I had not forgotten the arrogant treatment afforded to me when I visited the RCA office. The power in this exchange was now mine. 'Holloway Road is in London. We are a Manchester band.'

'I don't think you understand we are one of the biggest companies and we are telling you we want to come and see you.' The RCA representative was now getting a little irked. Maybe she had failed to understand the changing dynamics of the situation. She could not have made it any more obvious that she was keen to sign us if she had waved a cheque in front of my face. She was desperate to get to the band before any other company came in with an offer that I could not refuse. Rule number two in negotiation, never appear grateful or desperate.

'We rehearse in Manchester.'

'Right,' was her terse response. This conversation was not going to plan at all, at least from RCA's point of view. It was a game of poker.

There was a pause. Rule number three, never talk during a negotiation just to fill in the silence. She now knew I was not desperate. The swanky London address, receptionist, leather chairs and Evian had not done the usual trick of convincing a penniless musician that they needed RCA more than RCA needed them.

'Err. Mike! Still there?'

'Still here.'

'Ok, ok, what day do you rehearse?'

What the representative of one of the most successful music corporations in history had not been made aware of was, at this stage, B.F.G. was now not a functioning live band. Joe, some weeks previously had decided to return to his native Northern Ireland. I was now therefore into the realms of mental gymnastics as to who we could ask to play bass and how many tracks they could learn before I could offer a date for RCA.

A name suddenly came to mind. 'Week Wednesday.'

With that, a date with the devil was struck.

Unfortunately, the standby bassist was not available until the day before the RCA entourage arrival. Still, I raced through as many of the

tracks as I could with him.

The day of the RCA visit eventually arrived, and the high-powered congregation finally pulled up outside the rehearsal room in Chorlton cum Hardy we shared with Simply Red. As soon as the kingmakers took their seats, we blasted through fifteen minutes of music then stopped dead.

I announced from behind the drum kit; 'Thanks for coming, I hope it's been useful for you'.

The assembled music execs looked at each other nonplussed. They were less than impressed and made it clear it was unlikely I would be placed on their collective Christmas card list any time soon.

'What do you mean? We have come all this way to see you rehearse. You do have more songs, don't you?'

We did have more tracks, but the bass player had only managed to learn four or five well enough to play to an audience. It was time to play them at their own game.

'I am sure you are aware there was an article about us in Melody Maker. It's caused a lot of interest so we can only give you fifteen minutes. We have more companies coming to see us tonight.'

After a few furtive looks and whispered comments between the assembled A&R managers, the head honcho finally enquired, 'who else is coming?'

'Do you want me to tell them you were here?' was my response.

At that, the woman who only a couple of weeks previously had kept me waiting for twenty minutes turned to her fellow travellers from the capital, 'well, it was worth a try.'

Dumbfounded, they stood up in unison and made their way to the door that they had walked through only fifteen minutes earlier. 'We will be in touch.' was the departing line of the disgruntled audience.

Immediately they drove away there was consternation in the B.F.G. camp.

'You've blown it!'

'What?'

'We had a chance there, and you've screwed it. Do you think they are going to sign us after that?' The band were not impressed. I, however, was delighted. By the close of play the following day, a deal was offered, leaving us with total artistic freedom and a sizeable advance. The important aspect was that I was now able to outsource some of my workload. This allowed me to concentrate more on the reason I was in the industry in the first place, to make music. To look

after the financial aspect, the first cheque I wrote when the advance hit the Attica bank account was issued to a leading Manchester accountant.

Over the following few months, I got to know the lady who I had dealt with at RCA pretty well. In reality, she was a charming individual. We both knew this was just how the business worked. If you did not realise your value, then you had no place in the music business. It would eat you alive. That's why the vast majority of artists never see any real money. She later told me that during a meeting with her CEO, they had discussed how the negotiations had gone. One of the main reasons that RCA signed B.F.G. was because we appeared to know what we were doing. We were a safe bet.

At this point, you may be wondering why I am going into such detail about my previous life within the music business. The reason – despite the outward appearance of little similarity between the music business and the world of aviation, in reality, the two are very similar. Both feed off the general naïveté of those wanting to become involved in either industry. Both are in the business of selling dreams.

An example, at least from the music business perspective was, and still is to some extent, based on the desperation of the vast majority of people trying to break into the industry. Most assume if they land a major record deal, then they have 'made it'. Most who sign a major deal have no idea of the financial hole which they have effectively now just placed themselves in. The record deals offered in the '80s and '90s make the current payday lenders APRs of 2000% seem like the deal of the century.

A record label, when it signs a band, pays that band an advance. What most fail to realise is that this is nothing more than a loan. From that loan, first, the taxman wants his cut. The manager will then take around 20% gross of the advance, thereby taking advantage of the fact that a majority of musicians are not aware of the difference between gross and net. Of course, it is not in the manager's or label's interests to explain the difference. From what is left, which is now less than 50% of the original advance (loan) the band have to pay for equipment, rent, food and in some cases studio time. Sometimes studio costs are fronted by the label, but, that amount is added to the loan, as are the expense of videos and tour support.

These facts are all in the contract which contains a good sprinkling of the following: 'cross-collateralisation' and 'recoupable'. Mention those words to the typical musician, and it will usually elicit a blank

stare and an open mouth. Those two words, however, are fundamental to how the music industry operates. Recoupable means that all the money spent by the label on a particular band is added to the original advance to be paid back through record sales. Cross-collateralization ensures that the label can access money from any of the artist's operations such as touring, merchandise, or a very successful release. They then 'recoup' the entire advance paid to the artist for the less successful releases. The band will generally repay the advance from sales.

So, how much of a financial hole are most artists in?

The following is just a quick peek behind the curtain that Andrew Gold pulled back to reveal the reality of being a musician. There are, of course, a tiny minority who make millions, but you would have more luck playing the lottery. The figures make for grim reading. Assuming the band get an advance of £250,000. Of this, the manager takes his 30% gross £50,000.

The loan (advance) must be repaid out of the royalty rate agreed in the deal. Typically 13% of 90% of retail. At this point, you will have noticed the band only get royalties on 90% of the albums they sell. That is because the label deducts 10% for the cost of packaging. Let's assume that the band's first release is a successful one, and it sells 1/4 million copies. The average cost of a CD in the shops is, in round figures, £10.00. The amount of money generated by those sales is therefore around 2.5 million pounds. For a band of four individuals who have agreed to split income equally, how much would you guess each band member would earn at the end of that year? £200,000, £300,000, more?

Welcome to the Alice in Wonderland world of the music industry.

13% of 90 % of sales = £292,500. With the advance of £250,000 repaid that leaves a profit of £42,000. Well actually, no it doesn't. There are legal fees, studio time, musical equipment, producer's fees, equipment rental, mastering, video costs, stage wear, promotion.

First and foremost, the government will want its pound of flesh in the form of tax. The list of outgoings goes on and on whereas the list of income streams shrinks year on year.

When the accountants at year's end come to audit, the final figures for each 'cog' in the production of the album, after the distributor and retail have taken the lion's share of the £2.5 million will be in the region of:

Record company: £700,000 Producer: £100,000 Manager: £50,000

Studio: £100,000

Booking Agent: £10,000

Solicitor £20,000

As you can now see, the band, at the end of the year where they have made the 'music industry' over £2.5 million will each be lucky to earn half that which a BMI cabin crew receives. It's worse now than how I have described it. For example, up until recently, major labels were holding back money to be paid as royalties due to breakages on downloads and streams!

As if that was not bad enough, in the above example, the band will, after paying all the costs, still actually owe money to the label. i.e. They will not have recouped. The follow-up album, driven by the success of the first, is promoted even more heavily. Again, this is ultimately paid for by the band. If any of the band's albums become massive sellers, the group will be the last to see any money due to cross-collateralisation.

If you're still not convinced, ask yourself why, after selling millions of albums and selling out stadiums worldwide did Michael Jackson die broke? He was not the first and will not be the last to do so. What many artists fail to realise is, despite eventually paying for everything, they never own what they made. The label does.

Remember Take That? Well, take this. The group were on half royalties whenever their label spent more than £25,000 on promotion in any month. No guesses when that particular promotional budget was spent?

Wham's first label deal they signed gave an excellent royalty rate on singles, but the two-piece group would get zero for 12-inch releases. The guys assumed that as the number of 12-inch single remixes were not going to be big sellers for them, they would agree to the deal. Unfortunately, they had not seen the catch. The only real money in the 80/90's was in album sales. And what size are albums? The list of bands not doing 'due diligence' on deals is endless. It's still going on. Spotify anyone?

While researching for an artist on the newly re-launched Attica Records, I was reviewing the latest way that people listen to music. Spotify is currently the only show in town.

The artist I am currently working with is the pianist Amelia Chain. The music is classical in style, piano and orchestral, similar to the music of Yann Tiersen, and Ludovico Einaudi. As I write this, I am sat next to her on the tour bus.

During research for the Amelia Chain release, I found that Spotify pays, in very approximate figures, \$0.004 to the copyright holder for every stream. Now consider that if you are on a major deal, with a royalty rate of 13% of 90%, this equates to \$0.000468 per stream. For every million streams the artist/group is paid \$468. The label pockets \$4000. It's going to be a long time before £250,000 is recouped.

The only way for an artist to gain a significant number of streams on Spotify is to have a track appear on a Spotify-curated playlist. Each of these playlists can have over one million monthly listeners. As I researched these playlists, I was coming across artists with tens of millions of streams that not only had I never heard of, but they had no social media presence whatsoever or even a website. All very strange. They all appeared to live in an ecosystem that was Spotify and Spotify alone. Shortly afterwards a story broke in the music industry magazines that accused Spotify of having fake artists on the service. It was alleged the company was paying a flat fee to session artists. They would then place the tracks on one of their playlists, ensuring regular income for the platform with no further outgoings to those who had written the music. Spotify, as you would expect, denied it.

The players might be different, but the game never changes.

It is estimated that 95% of bands that have signed to a record label never see any more money other than their very first advance.

This is now, but back in the eighties, we still had no real money to show for our efforts. Everything I made was being reinvested in paying for studio time, new releases, artwork, promotion, and covering the costs of the large number of concerts we were now performing abroad. No money yet, but my eye was on the potential, I was building it slowly and carefully.

The Stone Roses were beginning to break into the big time along with a host of other Manchester bands such as The Inspiral Carpets, 808 State, James and Happy Mondays. B.F.G. was tipped to be the next band in the *Madchester* explosion. Everything was going to plan. Everything was running like clockwork. Everything was going so swimmingly...

The letter from the receiver explained everything. The distribution company that I had signed Attica Records to had gone into liquidation. It owed a lot of money to a lot of bands and record labels. Unfortunately, Attica was one of them. Without the money owed, it would be impossible to carry on. All those record sales and concerts, would, in the end, count for nought.

A meeting was called for all of the creditors to attend. I managed to find myself sitting next to members of the band The Wedding Present. They looked as miserable as I felt. All that work, time and effort, all for nothing,—of course, we had had a fantastic amount of fun, but nevertheless, it left a sour taste in the mouth. The affairs of the distribution company that handled our releases were inextricably linked to the problems experienced by the record division at Rough Trade. Rough Trade was the record label for whom The Smiths recorded. Rough Trade owed The Smiths a significant amount of money. As the label had folded, The Smiths had now signed EMI. Their new label had the legal muscle to squeeze every last penny owed to their new protégés. That would mean both myself and The Wedding Present, among many others, would be lucky to walk away with anything more than a soggy packet of crisps. Even then, we would probably have had to share the packet.

It looked like it was back to square one, no money, no band, no car, no house and no label. I did, however, gain one invaluable ability. It was the ability to sense bovine excrement at one thousand paces. Several years of listening to coke-addled individuals with bubble perms and nasty silk bomber tour jackets, usually with the sleeves pushed up to the elbows had honed this skill. They would promise the earth but would deliver nothing. Years of hearing every excuse under the sun from promoters and labels and distributors as to why they couldn't pay money owed only served to heighten that sense. Of course, this tactic of business refusing to honour written contracts keeps the legal profession in gainful employment and not, as I was to learn years later, just in the music business. It still amazes me how often this tactic works. It appeared that in the music business, as it did in later life in the aviation world, individuals just seemed to shrug their shoulders and give up chasing what was rightfully theirs.

Twenty-eight years old, without a penny to my name. Most of my old school friends were now doctors, dentists, solicitors, and most had children and houses with cloakrooms bigger than the rented flat I was still occupying in Didsbury.

I had grown tired of relying on people who frequently did not uphold their side of a bargain, regularly letting me down. I was continually questioning peoples' motives and integrity. But this *was* the music business after all.

The financial collapse of Rough Trade had not only shattered my future in music, but it had also smashed into tiny pieces any long-held

dream to finance a future career as a pilot.

I was still shell-shocked about the turn of events when I decided to take a bus ride into the city centre. This was a few years before that well-known demolition company, the provisional IRA, thankfully decided that Mancunians were sick and tired of the Arndale Shopping Centre. The Arndale was a retail complex in the heart of Manchester that visually resembled a public toilet. It also shared the same aroma. The building was as bland as a service station sandwich and was the same shade of brown that resembled the meat filling within.

The Arndale's one saving grace was that it had a branch of the Waterstones bookstore located within its sprawling reaches. Being a typical Manchester summer's day, it was cold, and it was wet. It was pouring down. To take shelter, I dashed into the bookshop along with what felt like every other person within a fifty-mile radius. The resulting musty smell of a group of soaked shoppers resembled that of a damp dog. It was a slight improvement on the previous Arndale fragrance. As I stood there waiting for the downpour to ease off, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a book that this time really did light the blue touch paper. It was a flame that had threatened to catch several times in the past but had never progressed past smouldering. The title of the book escapes me, but it was one of a series aimed at preparing pilots for their ground school exams. This one, in particular, was concerned with meteorology. The memories of what I wanted to do as a child, my dismissive careers adviser, and the inspirational conversation with Andrew Gold all came flooding back to the forefront of my mind, collapsing in a heap in my frontal lobe. I picked up the book. My life would never be the same again.