





AFTERWORD :

UNRULY FICTIONS AND AGGRESSIVE GUITARS

SOME STORIES COME OF AGE LIKE REBELLIOUS CHILDREN.

They refuse to cooperate. They talk back and put you in tough spots.

They leave their stuff scattered all around your desk, your mind, your heart.

They confuse you.

You love them anyway. You do your best with them and hope your bad habits and baggage don't influence them too much. You try to stop them from abusing adverbs. You make sure they're wearing all their commas, semi-colons, and periods in the right places when they go out of the house. But they take on a life of their own.

About all we authors can do with such unruly fictions is go with the flow, keep things on an even keel, and hope it all ends well.

The good ones surprise and delight us as much (we hope) as they do our readers.

The bad ones we lock away in bottom drawers and maybe pull out later to raid for ideas.

Three Chords of Chaos revealed itself as one of these tumultuous tales when Gorge first laid eyes on the dumpster-diving scrape sprite. I hadn't planned it, but that poor guy was doomed the moment I finished describing him. Gorge whispered in my ear what he meant to do to him—and I couldn't persuade him otherwise.

I tried. I rewrote the scene, rearranged it, let other characters try to talk some sense into Gorge, gave that little garbage-eater some pluck—all to no avail.

The more I pushed, the more Gorge pushed back.



He made it clear who he was, what he wanted, and left it to me deal with it.

So I did. He is, after all, the star of the show.

Which is one reason why *Three Chords of Chaos* isn't precisely the novella I set out to write. So there, my secret's out; of course no one would be the wiser if I didn't 'fess up. In fact, if you were to ask my editor, she would tell you the finished story is pretty close to the one I outlined for her back when Gorge was only another rough-edged faerie in a couple of short stories in the award-winning *Bad-Ass Faeries* anthologies. Back before he thought he knew it all. I could still get a word or two into that hard head of his then. How fast egos expand—even those of characters who exist only on paper. Gorge's became a gravity well, warping my story to suit him; though the fundamentals of my original plot didn't change all that much, the final tale is very different in detail and emphasis than what I'd envisioned.

The usual adjustments that come with writing occurred. Character names changed. Personalities shifted. Supporting characters came and went. Plot points tightened. Scenes shrank or expanded. Themes grew and sharpened. What changed most, though, was the story's balance. At the outset, I saw *Three Chords of Chaos* as much more of a period piece entrenched in the American indie and underground rock music scene of the late 70s and early 80s. I wanted to write as much about that era and its music as about the characters. I harbored notions of who Gorge is and why that time offered the perfect environment for him, and exploring that provided an early, driving force behind the novella.

It seemed like a natural fit for my fallen faerie. Gorge shares a lot in common with the musicians and fans who defined influential rock music in those years.

Instinctive defiance of the established order.

Principled disdain for pure commerce.

Open-eyed cynicism directed at all kinds of authority.

A self-dependent, self-reliant DIY attitude.

An unflinching dedication to making good, challenging music.

Most of all, though, a near symbiotic relationship with their fans.

Many of the bands that shaped that era never became household names. Chances are you've never heard of some them, never listened to their music. They got scant radio play in their prime, and few ever released records on major labels. If you were listening to these bands back in the day, it's because you were plugged into something special. You went to concerts held in people's houses or dive venues or community centers. Or you read one of the fanzines of the day and mail-ordered singles and EPs based on reputation alone or a trusted reviewer's

praise. Maybe you caught mention of some these bands in the hipper music magazines and newspapers, but you never caught them on MTV, top 40 radio, TV commercials, or movie soundtracks. The few of these bands I knew of at the time I encountered only because a friend of mine had a mixtape of their music made for him by one of his friends who'd raided an older sibling's records to make it. That tape was radioactive. My friend kept it hidden. It had songs on it with really bad words *in the titles*.

That tape was more valuable than gold.

It was the only real—albeit brief—exposure I had to indie underground music.

I grew up in the suburbs. My peers loved classic rock and hair metal or pop dance and power ballads. I started out on a different path; the first two albums I bought myself were *Synchronicity* and *The Best of Blondie*. A pretty good start for my nascent musical tastes. But then the wave of popular music and MTV bands swept me up, and though not all of that was bad, much of it was pretty shallow and none of it ever seemed entirely *real*.

It's my curse to have never been on the cutting edge when it comes to discovering new music. I tend to connect the dots about a year or so (often much longer) after bands break up. I did it with the Pixies. I did it with Soundgarden. I've done it with half a dozen other of my favorite groups or songwriters. I walk into the party about the time everyone else is nodding off, the lights are on, and the only beer left is the cheap local brew. Sometimes I get lucky and catch on early, but my luck can also be cruel.

One indie band I clued into early was Hüsker Dü.

They received a lot of press in the early 80s for an indie band, some in publications that actually came my way once in a while, such as *Spin* and *Rolling Stone*, and occasionally *The Village Voice*. Hüsker Dü blipped my radar so I started prowling for their albums. The first one I found was *Candy Apple Grey*, ironically their first major label release. I snatched it up, put it on, and waited to be amazed only to be deflated when the album made little impression on me. It's good but it didn't justify the hype. I had a lot riding on that album. I wanted a lifeline to reel myself in to the world of genuine, soul-searing, underground rock music that remained only a rumor to me. The people I knew whose tastes stood entrenched within the confines of radio songs often assumed "indie" or "underground" equaled "bad," and that's why the bands weren't more successful. My instincts told me different. I sought something to knock the scales from our eyes.

Candy Apple Grey didn't do it.

It didn't explain why the lifeblood coursing through the underground was much richer and more vibrant than that of the mainstream. It's taken me nearly thirty years to understand how cheated I was and what might've been if only that first Hüsker Dü album had been *Flip Your Wig* or *Zen Arcade* or *Metal Circus*. Those albums—when I finally gave them a chance—blew that old hype away.

What stings is that I didn't listen to them until I began my research for *Three Chords of Chaos*, only about a year and a half ago. In that time, though, my enlightenment has led me to a lot of music I'd overlooked and back to some I never fully appreciated when I first heard it. I spent a significant portion of my research time for this story with headphones on, immersed in the music that informs Gorge's back story. Black Flag. Dead Kennedys. The Germs. Hüsker Dü. Minor Threat. Minutemen. Mission of Burma. The Ramones. Richard Hell and the Voidoids. The Stooges. Sonic Youth. Television. Hell, even Mötörhead (technically not part of the American indie music scene, but who can deny Lemmy?). It's a double-edged sword: I missed out on a lot of phenomenal music over the years because *Candy Apple Grey* didn't light up the right synapses, but on the other hand I've got it all to listen to now, when good new rock music is damn hard to find. Better yet, it remains as fiery and inspiring as it must have been when it was first written, played, and recorded.

There's true life in this music.

There's heart. There's blood and sweat. There's pain, fear, and passion. There's anger and hope, desperation and arrogance. There's lowlife and genius.

It's like the Minutemen sang: "I live sweat, but I dream light years."

Like there is for Gorge, there's magic in it too.

The more I learned about the music and the musicians, about the bands and the upstart indie record companies, about the econo tours in vans held together with spit and prayer and the informal network of musicians and fans who traded information (like hobos in decades past marking friendly houses with secret symbols), the clearer it became that the scope of the underground music scene, the variety of its music, and the sheer power of its existence sprawled far beyond what I could hope to capture in a single novella. I set *Three Chords of Chaos* in New York City, but some of the brightest-burning indie hotspots lay in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Minneapolis, and Washington D.C. Even worse? The prospect of encapsulating in a piece of short fiction the range of a musical movement that spans from Minor Threat's hardcore, no-holds-barred guitar rage and vocal assault to Minutemen's quirky, funky punk to Mission of Burma's jangly crashing melodies to Sonic Youth's trippy art punk to Hüsker Dü's blend of razor-edged guitar riffs and sixties-

inflected songs—and a dozen or more other musical styles and philosophies.

It was a dark day when I realized there was simply no way that 40,000 words was enough to tell a story that would do justice to all that.

Fortunately, Gorge gave me the answer.

Standing at the dumpster, tragic scrape sprite in hand, Gorge made it clear that *this* particular novella was about him. Maybe he'd be happy to share the stage and jam with the greats of the American underground, but *Three Chords of Chaos* was not going to be so much historical fiction as a journey with greatest musician ever to be kicked out of the realms of the sidhe. The story is his—well, his and Delilah's. You may have noticed he's got a soft spot for her.

So I let Gorge take over.

He turned out not to be a total prick, either.

He gave me a good story and let me sneak in a fair few nods to the history and realities of the indie scene, to the good and the bad, to the spirit that shaped it, and the music that defined it. Maybe Gorge would've fit in among the bands and clubs of that time. Maybe not. He's got an epic attitude problem. But then his world isn't quite that world. It's a skewed version where magic is real, and a wounded, fallen, relentlessly pissed-off faerie can become an overnight rock god in the mortal world. In Gorge's reality, music equals power. Except for the really magic stuff, that's not too different from our world. The fact that music recorded when I was barely a teenager remains as potent and infectious today as it ever was—that the stories of the people who made that music and the trails they blazed have done so much to inspire countless other musicians as well as this story—speaks to that power. It hasn't faded but only grown, along with the importance and appreciation of those pioneering bands. It reaches beyond the music, too.

In today's small and specialty press, I see much the same defiant, DIY, integrity that marked those indie musicians. It's quieter and less prone to spark fistfights, but the attitude is there. Sure, it's easier now to get the word out, to network, to find your fans, to record or publish your work, and put it in people's hands. (Imagine what pivotal indie record companies, such as Alternative Tentacles, Dischord, and SST, could've accomplished with the Internet instead of mail-order sales and handshake deals with regional distributors.)

One thing hasn't changed or gotten easier, though.

It still takes guts and a bottomless well of dedication to flip the bird to the mainstream and put your work or the work of others out into the world the way you want it to be—the way you *know* it should be—and bare your soul to your readers, your fans.

Gorge might say it's the only worthwhile choice.

He's never been known for choosing the easy path.

Like those indie musicians, he believes body and soul in his music, as authors must believe in their stories—and as sometimes they must trust them to lead where they need to go.

Whether or not you're into the music that inspired *Three Chords of Chaos*, I hope you enjoyed the story. If you've never sampled the bands of that era, I encourage you to give them a listen. Despite the changes, I still mean *Three Chords of Chaos* to be an homage to that music, that era, its spirit, and the independent and punk musicians who lived it. Peppered throughout the story are a handful of Easter eggs, nods to some of the bits and pieces of the past. Also I've included a short list of recommended listening. It's incomplete by far, only a starting point, and it's not strictly true chronologically to the era or the movement, but all of it influenced my writing, all of it played—at one point or another and often at high volume—while I wrote this story. Check it out. It's pretty easy to find these days. I listened to a lot of it on Rhapsody, which offers a wealth of albums from that time and the music that followed it. If you don't like one band, try another. Try ones not on my list. They're all unique; you're bound to find something.

No doubt, those who lived through this scene—those who experienced this music as it was created, or who sweat through the live shows, or helped make it all possible by giving a piece of their own personal magic—will find mistaken assumptions, incorrect details, or other bits I didn't get quite right. I apologize for any inaccuracies. I hope those readers will still find *Three Chords of Chaos* respectful of the spirit of the era.

There are many references and documentaries about this music. Two books were particularly helpful in my research: *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981-1991* by Michael Azerrad (Black Bay Books, 2002) and *American Hardcore: A Tribal History, Second Edition* by Steven Blush (Feral House, 2010). Also helpful were the films *Punk's Not Dead* (dir. Susan Dwyer, 2007), which provided perspective on the threads that run from punk's roots through to its present, and *Sid & Nancy* (dir. Alex Cox, 1986), which offered invaluable insight into the prototypical punk attitude, which now I think of it so does another Alex Cox film: *Repo Man* (1984).

Gorge isn't big fan of movies, but I'm certain he'd approve of that one.

James Chambers
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