

from *Sweat: The Story Of The Fleshtones, America's Garage Band* (Continuum Books, 2007), by Joe Bonomo:

Prologue; Or, Maybe I'll Go Back To School To Find Out Where I Went Wrong

He's somewhere between a song and a shout. Pulling a mock-heroic face, throwing a profile at a half-filled club, graying bangs falling in his face as he moves to a mongrel Jerk, a Frug, moves like he probably moves at home in front of the stereo.

Columbus, Ohio, halfway across the god damn country. A long way from the East Village, anyway. A medallion swings around his neck like a knockoff of a psychedelic relic glinting beneath red and yellow stage lights. At the bar sit a dozen drinkers who aren't really watching, engaged in hunched-over debauchery of their own, snorting powder, flirting skirts, slaying some hours in the din of yet another rock & roll band making noise from a stage.

My dreams are frayed, my dreams and shoes are more worn.

He'll take the mike stand and spin it around like a geeky shaman. If you listen closely he might be channeling something, a prism for long-lost 1-4-5 and "Louie Louie" chord changes and beer glasses clinking. He'll hold the mike stand out in front of him and hop over it, his back to the crowd, willing James Brown or Kid Thomas or Jackie Wilson from some poorly-lit basement party a hundred years ago in a white concrete garden suburb in Queens, New York. Wail, baby, wail.

An hour earlier he'd wrapped duct tape around that mike, marrying it to the stand with a far away look in his eyes, the twirling repetition of a nights-old gesture spinning a dreadful dullness that had to be avoided at all costs.

Later, he taped a handwritten sign on the wall near the front door: "MERCHANDISE FOR SALE." He tried three times, the damn thing still hung crooked.

One more big night, another bitter dawn.

The song kicks into the chorus now and the singer's eyes light up and he grins crooked, sweat rolling down his face, but now no one can really tell if he's for real or if he's some kind of joke.

Onstage he does something weird: he pulls out the pockets of his pants, scatters some lint on the stage, shrugs his shoulders at no one. He's laughing.

*My life's been spent, too late to rearrange.
But I didn't sell my soul.*

At least I've nothing for it to show.

Now he grabs a beat-up harmonica from his front pocket, looks down to check his bearings, blows while the guitarist, ax flashing, puts one pointy boot on the stage monitor and wails. The drummer and the bass player keep an impossibly energetic beat going behind the ragged melody that soars over the heads of the club goers, the drinkers, the cute college-age waitresses, the distracted sound man, the hipsters. The music leaks out the occasionally-opening front door onto High Street and the swirl of a grimy late-night avenue and its grimy shadows and the many memories forgotten in those shadows. The song lifts to the rooftops.

But I gave my life away for a few good memories and a pocketful of change.