

When the wheels fall off.

DELI BY day, dance club by night, Alvin's lived up and down to its name, a Finer Delicatessen and Twilight Bar. From outside of Alvin's, you could just about spit on the Edsel Ford Freeway where it passed under Cass Avenue. The bands at Alvin's were live and local. They set up at the back with plenty of floor space for tables and boogie. As hot as the days were outside, the nights inside were hotter.

Inside of Alvin's, the bar ran along the north side and the stools filled up early. A woman stood near the end of the bar, facing the bartender. She wore tight white pants. A brown stain the size of a coaster graced the crack of her lower butt. No one noticed the color of her blouse.

A man in his mid-thirties stood next to her at the very end of the bar. He faced outward from the bar, one hand holding onto the bar, the other holding a drink. He stood like a tree in the wind, rooted at the bottom, swaying at the top. He was Mitch Ryder, lead singer and owner of a dozen hit songs with the Detroit Wheels in the late 1960s. It had been 13 years since he had a record on the charts. No one recognized him any more than they noticed the color of the woman's top.

After a long break, the band returned to their instruments and the lead singer to his microphone. "I have to apologize, everyone, I can't sing the next set. I'm sick. Too sick." The crowd moaned. "But!" He gestured toward the end of the bar. "Mitch Ryder is in the house tonight! Mitch Ryder! Can you help us out, Mitch!" The audience turned as one to Mitch Ryder, the lead singer started clapping, and the audience joined in. "Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels!"

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Ryder gingerly navigated his way to the stage and stepped up. "Thank you, Mitch! Thank you! Give it up for Mitch Ryder!" The lead singer pushed the mike into Ryder's hand.

"Thank you. Thank you." Ryder's voice was rough. "Put me on the spot." He lowered the microphone and said something to the band.

"Here's one I've done once or twice," Ryder said. " 'Devil with a blue dress.' " The crowd broke into applause. Several took to the dance floor.

Ryder moved the battered microphone stand in front of him. He put the mike in the stand and tried to adjust the height, but he couldn't get it to lock. He gave up and held the mike to his mouth. He held the stand with his other hand, balancing himself. With a nod to the drummer and a count, the band played. Ryder started singing out of sync. The mike crackled like Rice Krispies and Ryder moved it in and out. It screeched. People on the dance floor stopped and stared. "Alright," Ryder said, "stop, stop, this mike is bad." Some boos could be heard. "Give it up," someone yelled.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Ryder was sweating. He put the mike back in the stand and leaned on it like a walking stick. "Can I get a guitar?" The lead guitarist complied. "And a stool?" Someone brought a stool. Ryder sat down and tested a few chords. Then he played.

It was as far from the Detroit Wheels as Detroit was from the 1960s. It was rock that sounded like blues. It was blues that sounded like rock. The drummer picked it up and then the bass. Ryder half closed his eyes and sang. His voice sounded half gone and world-wise:

*Ain't nobody white can sing the blues
Ain't nobody white can sing the blues
No white man ever suffered
He never lived in pain
It's all been fish eggs and champagne
It's killing me*

The front of Alvin's chattered away, rowdy, but in the back by Mitch Ryder the crowd was rapt. Ryder lost his place in the lyrics. The band played long solos. Ryder repeated and finished:

*Ain't nobody white can sing the blues
Ain't nobody white can sing the blues
No white man ever died young
For the right to live
He opens wallets and he gives
It's killing me
You're killing me*

Something white moved at the end of the bar. Ryder squinted in that direction. The woman in the brown-stained tight white pants was leaving. Ryder knew the color of her blouse. It was red, and it was killing him.

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