

Rock My Soul
by Nancy Springer

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Her secret slogan was, “I don’t get mad, I get even.” With this motto in mind she sat pressing her bedroom phone’s redial button with grim per-sistence until she had gone into a trance of spite and was startled when she actually got through.

“Dedication Hour, this is the Soul of Rock and Roll, hel-LO! Who are YOU?”

It was the first time she had done this. She took a heartbeat to answer.
“Michelle.”

“Michelle. Well HEL-lo Mike. Does anybody ever call you Mike?”

“No.” She was sort of the class nerd, too inward, always thinking too much, even though she had traded in her glasses on contacts. Who would call her Mike?

“Mickey? Shelley?”

“No.” Where did he get off making fun of her name? He didn’t even use his own name on the air, just called himself the Soul.

“Just plain Michelle, huh?”

Plain was the word, all right. “Yes.”

He gave up on getting a reaction out of her. “Well, what can I do for you, Michelle?”

“I want to make a hate dedication.”

“A *hate* dedication!” He pounced. “Oh, my goodness! How come? What has somebody done to you, Michelle?”

“Well. . . .” Well, why not? Auto-matically she edited her speech to sound more like a typical teenager and less like the geek she was. “There’s this guy, see, and we were supposed to go to the junior prom tomorrow night. And I’ve got the dress and everything . . . and today in the middle of the cafeteria he *informs* me he’s going with his old girl-friend instead.”

“No kidding! Like, what a slimeball!”

“Yeah.” For the moment she let it go that the Soul of Rock and Roll was an

obnoxious deejay, his reaction felt so good to her. Though in fact she had not managed to convey to him a quarter of the story. The boy who had broken her heart was Robbie Diehl, a biker with a messed-up head and long bleached hair and a skull painted on the back of his denim jacket, the only cool guy who had ever liked her. She had thought she loved him. And what she had gone through to catch his eye, and get her father to let her date him, and make her mother buy her a prom dress he wouldn't laugh at, was a soap opera in itself.

“He is really horse boogers, you know that?” the Soul expanded, using to the fullest the limited vocabulary he was allowed on the air. “Like, this guy is cow snot, Michelle.”

“Yeah,” she fervidly agreed.

“He did a tap dance on you, Michelle! Nobody should treat you like that. Tell you what. I, the Soul of Rock and Roll, am going to take you to the prom my-self.”

“Sure.” Her voice went flat again. Some people had the balls to make fun of anything.

“I'm serious! I want to take you to the prom. It's tomorrow night, right? I'll see you then, okay?”

She said sarcastically, “Right.”

“There, that's settled. Now, what song do you want to send out to this piece of crud?”

She loved to listen to rock music, but the demands of her parents concerning her schoolwork didn't leave her much time for it. No longer sure that she knew which were the cool songs, she said, “You choose.”

“All riiiiight! Michelle, I got a song here I been just waiting for a real wad of scum to dedicate it to. What's this guy's name?”

“Robbie.”

“Okay, Michelle, your song's going out to Robbie right now.”

She hung up and lay back on her bed, turned up her bedside clock-radio and listened. After a few lines of the song she started to smile. The lyrics made her feel much better.

*You're just a big ding-a-ling
Can't keep your hands away
from your thing Look at you.*

*My oh my If you ain't the
Lord Of The Fly.*

That was Robbie all right. She hoped he was listening somewhere public, like the Sub Shop hangout where he used to take her. The Soul of Rock and Roll had done good.

A few lines into the next song, a sticky love ballad, the phone rang. Her parents always expected her to pick it up. Without enthusiasm Michelle did so.

“Hello?”

“Hello! Were you afraid it was going to be Robbie?”

It was the Soul. She recognized his brash young voice and wondered briefly how he had gotten her number when he did not know her last name. There must be some sort of tracing device at the studio, she decided. Tracing calls was not as big a deal as TV cop shows made it seem. Her parents had once ordered a trace to stop the nuisance phone calls she got from kids who didn't like her in seventh grade.

She told the Soul, “I wouldn't care if it was Robbie. I hope he heard that song. It was perfect.”

“Hey, I'm glad you liked it.” His tone had changed completely. “Michelle, lis-ten, I guess you think I'm kind of a prick, but that's just on the air. Really, I — I'm a thumbsucker, okay? I hug my teddy bear every night and cry myself to sleep. Listen, I'm a lonely guy. If you still want to go to the prom, and if you need an escort, I really would like to take you.”

“Give me a break!”

“I mean it! Listen, it's not like you'd look stupid with me. I'm only a little bit older than you.”

He had to hang up then and take the next dedication, then call her back. He had done this twice before she began to believe him.

“I don't know. . . . What do you look like?”

“What do you want me to look like?”

“Would you get *real*?”

“Hey, I'm the Soul. You'd be amazed how real I can get. Who's your favorite rock star?”

“Jon Bon Jovi.”

“You got it.”

“You kidding? If you come here with hair like Jon Bon Jovi’s, my parents won’t let me out the door.”

“Hey, Jon’s been talking about get-ting a haircut anyway. It’ll be cool. Trust me. What time should I come?”

“I haven’t said you should come at all!”

He said, “In time to take you out to dinner beforehand, right? That way if you really hate me. . . .”

He sounded hurt. She said, “Oh, for God’s sake,” and he knew he had won.

“I’ll pick you up around six, then.”

In the morning she told her parents that her best friend had arranged for a cousin to escort her, an obliging big-brother sort of boy, very nice. Though they did not say so, she could tell they felt relieved that she was going, not so much for her sake as for the sake of the money spent buying the prom gown, which might have gone to waste. Not to speak of the hassle spent buying the prom gown. Michelle’s mother had wanted long, lacy and pink, with white gloves and little puff sleeves. Michelle had wanted short, strapless and black. The compromise, lipstick red with swoop hemline, pleased neither of them.

Standing in the harlot-scarlet thing on prom night at six, pretending to fuss with her hair, already feeling the sweat crawling in her naked armpits, Michelle felt certain not only that she was going to be stood up but also that she somehow deserved to be. Sweet sixteen and almost never; who could want such a dweeb? Though she herself knew what she wanted, exactly what she de-sired of this magical night. She wanted someone good-looking and male to avail himself of the terrific access provided by her low-cut gown and touch her vir-ginal breasts. She wanted maybe even to stop being virginal. And with such slutty thoughts she would be stood up, she deserved to be stood up —

A throaty rumble sounded in the driveway out front. Michelle hurried to her bedroom window, took a look and for a moment believed that fairy tales do come true: there in the warm late-day May sunshine sat an impeccably restored 1956 Thunderbird convertible, lily white. And getting out of it was a guy who looked like Jon Bon Jovi with Michael Damien hair.

Facing him in her living room a few minutes later, she began for the first time in her young life to understand the feeling of superstitious apprehension people get

when things are too good to be true.

Her date did not look just like Jon Bon Jovi after all: he looked better. Electric-blue eyes in the shadow of his dark, dark hair. Face worth fainting over. And the mouth, that sensitive, mobile, wide and full-lipped mouth — somehow every singer she had ever worshipped was in that mouth.

What the Hell did he want with her?

Yet there on her mother's sensible Sears carpet he stood, in a classic black tux — not a rental, that tux, it fit him too well, its fabric clung to the lines of his broad shoulders, its shining lapels were ever so slightly worn. It had to be his own, he wore it with an ease most guys gave only to jeans, and there he stood charming her parents with a well-bred young man's poise and manners, and smiling at her. Smiling at her. Just a little, as if to tell her he knew she knew what he was doing.

Who was he? What was he doing?

Once her mother had mistily pinned onto Michelle's red satin bodice the white corsage he had brought her, once under way in his purring T-bird, she asked him in a small voice, "What am I supposed to call you?" The name he had told her parents had been a joke only an adult would miss.

"Soul. What else?" He turned on his expensive, deep-voiced car stereo, and it played oldies, classic rock, stuff so good that she who listened to her radio all summer every summer should certainly have heard it before. But she had never heard it, any of it.

"I thought maybe you had another name."

"Hey, Mike, I got lots of names. Just call me Soul."

"Where are you from?"

"Everywhere."

He looked exotic enough for that to be true. Skin like tan satin. High cheekbones under those shadowed eyes.

"Soul, what are you doing this for, really?"

He looked at her, and his eyes made her think of both fire and ice. She knew her parents had been fooled, that he was not nice. The knowledge thrilled her; she felt as if she had straddled a beautiful, dangerous stallion. While she was with him people would look at her in awe; his beauty augmented hers. In answer to her question he said only, "You are exquisite in red," and she knew she had a right to

believe him.

“Want to cruise?” he asked her.

Of course she did. Just out of sight of her house she had removed her mar-ibou capelet and the rhinestoned spa-ghetti straps her mother had insisted on. Of course she wanted to be seen, in that wind-splitting albino bird of a car, bare-shouldered, her hair blowing back. With him.

She had the satisfaction of seeing heads turn all along the town loop.

“Hey. Can I tell my friends you’re the Soul of Rock and Roll?”

“You want to show me off? Radical affirmative, Mikeybabe. Where are the cool dudes and their dates going for din-ner?”

Into the city.

His charm was not only for her par-ents. By the time they got in sight of the skyscrapers he had her giggling. He took her to a tony place, bribed the headwaiter with a fifty because they didn’t have a reservation, walked be-hind her to the red-leather booth and slid in on the same side as her. From other booths some of her classmates gawked at her, or rather at the con-junction of her and him. Without di-rectly looking she saw their heads, spiral-permed or bristling with mousse, come up. The moment could have been made better only if Robbie and his pre-cious Apryl had been there.

No. She was better off not seeing Rob-bie yet.

Where was he?

Damn him, what did she care?

Soul ordered them wine with their dinner and got away with it. After the bobbing waiter had gone he turned to Michelle and said to her gravely, “Mike, before we go much farther there’s some-thing I want to get out of the way,” and he leaned over and softly, expertly kissed her. Startled, she stiffened but did not pull back, then surprised herself by laughing out loud. He settled back into his seat and grinned.

“There, isn’t that better? Now we can enjoy the dance. We won’t have to spend all evening wondering about later.”

She felt weightless with delight and terror, as if she could walk through walls and see mysteries. “You hot dog,” she said, though not at all harshly. “Who the Hell do you think you are?”

“I know who I am.”

She said, “So do I.” She said, “Just a backwoods kid, right? Born in a little place on a road with no name, right? A sharecropper’s cabin, maybe a row house in a steel-mill town. Your mother died when you were little. You never got along with your father. Always a rebel, always a loner —”

His head jerked around, and his eyes hushed her, frightened her for a moment, not because they blazed blue as coal fires but because they looked so naked. He said, “How do you know all that?”

“I just know.” Because she thought too much about things, especially about the things schoolteachers considered peripheral, such as the music she heard on her radio and the Soul of Rock and Roll. And since he had kissed her, she felt bold and challenged and entitled to fluster him a little if she could. As if a friendly devil sat on her shoulder and told her the words she said, “You always grew your hair too long, you fought everybody, you knocked your father down and ran away from home before you were through school. You had your first girl when you were twelve, your first drink before that. Probably drugs too.”

Without looking at her he said, “Reefers. That’s what we called grass back then. The hard junk came later.”

“I guess you did every kind of sex and drugs before you were done. You were an outlaw.” She spoke the last word not without admiration.

He said quietly to his hands on the candlelit table, “Don’t forget the gam-bling.”

“Right, okay, so you shot craps too.”

He looked at her then with a wincing smile. “You don’t know everything after all. The gambling was the best and the worst part. Not craps. I mean the kind I did onstage, with the guitar.”

“Right, I forgot to mention the guitar. About the same time as you got the first girl you would have got the guitar and learned how to make it do everything but the dishes.”

Straight to her he said, “Are you gonna listen to me, Michelle? Being onstage, singing to people, it was every-thing to me. It was my chance to be — accepted. I’d risk and risk for that. I’d put my heart on a platter, give my soul, spend everything I had on those faces in the dark beyond the spotlights if they’d just—”

His voice faltered. She reached over and touched his hand, finding it warm

and very human, like his lips. “All right,” she said softly. “I’m sorry. We don’t have to talk about it anymore.”

“Don’t ever be sorry. Hey.” He re-covered quickly, giving her a madcap grin. “Don’t mind me. It’s like I told you, I’m still crying for my mama. Never gonna get all the way grown up like you.”

She made a face at him. Their dinner came; he didn’t eat much, but sat and played with the black lace gloves she had laid on the table. With hungry eyes he watched her swallow lobster. He urged her to order dessert. Smiled as she forked strawberry pie.

On the way out he handed her the car keys. “You drive.”

“You’re putting me on, right?”

“Don’t you want to?”

“Drive the Bird? Does a jock want to spit?”

She turned the radio up high, floored the Thunderbird up the ramp and onto the expressway, broke the speed limit all the way to her home town and its country club.

“Here?” Soul, loafing in the passenger seat, straightened and looked around as she turned in at the gates, showing dismay when all her wild driving had caused him none.

“Sure. Where’d you think it would be?”

“At the school, in the gym.”

“This is the eighties, Soul.”

“Damn, you’re right.” He turned on his megawatt grin, dropped whatever bothered him in the shadows behind it, changed moods like changing costume between sets.

Blipping the accelerator, toying with the power at her daintily slipped toes, Michelle circled the country club grounds twice. Enjoying the car, showing off, drawing a crowd outside with the T-bird’s roar — and terrified to pull up at the door. Robbie might be there.

Yet she wanted him to see her with her heartthrob of a date.

And there under the entry awning he stood, staring, with blond punk Apryl on

his arm. Michelle saw him the moment she pulled up, feeling adrenaline surge turn her to neon in her red dress, waving like a movie star at everyone but him.

She greeted friends as Soul parked the car: “Hi, Tiffany. Hi, Denise. Hi, Nicole.”

“Hi-Michelle-who-is-that-GUY!”

They squealed like pigs when they found out, then mobbed him and asked him for autographs on their gowns. With rakish deejay wit he refused, making his way through them to Michelle. He put his arm around her bare shoulders and walked her toward the music. Passing Robbie and his Ape, she gave them a killer smile.

Into a ballroom decorated with balloons and crepe paper in her school colors, red and white. “Some things don’t change,” Soul remarked. “Dance?” he asked her.

“Of course.” Though she had never been a confident dancer before.

He made her look good just because she was with him, as she had known he would. He moved like a tropical god, savage, exalted, instinctive. And it was live music, hip-thrusting arm-pumping heartbeat music, rock classics plus the throbbing big-city pulse of more recent tunes. And though strapless beauties were panting all around — and though in a general way Soul was aware of them, Michelle could tell he was — he looked mostly at her, and not like some-one who was doing anybody a favor. His eyes had gone soft as blue candleflame.

“Which guy is Robbie?” he asked once, and she pointed out Robbie and Apryl dancing near the edge of the ball-room. He said, “He dumped you for *that?*” and made her smile. Across the dance floor Robbie’s eyes had met hers, tense, unhappy. She tried not to glance at him again.

At the punchbowl between dances, once more she asked Soul, “Why are you doing this?”

“Drinking this awful stuff? I’m thirsty.”

“Smartass, you know what I mean. The dinner. Letting me drive. Being here. Being so nice when I know it has to go against your nasty nature. All of it.”

He hesitated, then said, “Can’t you feel it, Mike?”

“Maybe. Feel what?”

“Magic in the night. Innocence. Young love. They’re always in the air thick as

honeysuckle perfume on prom night.”

She danced with him more and had never felt so desirable. At some time she went to the restroom. In her stall was an ancient graffito, maybe from another prom night two decades before, scratched deep: “Jim Morrison will come again.” She remembered that after-ward because it seemed strange in ret-respect how she had noticed it that night, mulling over the inscription about Morrison the Lizard King before she went out to rejoin her strange rock an-gel of a date and watch the crowning of a prom king and queen.

Then the slow dancing started. Softly Soul gathered her in so that her head lay on his shoulder, so that she felt his warm breathing just like that of a real human being on hers. So that they danced heart to heart.

A dance later his hand had slipped down her snugly zippered back just to her coccyx, pressing a little. His hips tilted toward her. Her red satin belly felt what was happening under his tux-edo slacks, and she did not try to stop it. Against his hard black broadcloth shoulder her lips moved, smiling.

“Awright, break it up!”

Jerking upright, she thought at first it was one of the teachers, or a chap-erone. But most of them turned a blind eye by this time of night. In fact it was someone far younger and angrier: Rob-bie, standing spraddle-legged with his thin fists balled to fight.

“Get the fuck off her!”

Soul stood half a head taller than him, outweighed him by maybe forty pounds of muscle. “Are you cutting in?” he asked with courtesy meant to scald.

“I’d like to cut your —”

“Robbie!” Michelle wanted to slap him for acting like an asshole in front of everyone. “What are you trying to prove?”

He ignored her, saying to Soul, “I guess we all know who thinks he’s Lord of the Fly.”

So he’d heard the song. Suddenly Michelle felt half sorry for him. But only half. Silencing Soul with a hand on his arm, she said, “Robbie, for God’s sake get out of my face. You don’t own me. Go back to Ape.”

“Apryl got mad and went home an hour ago.” Robbie was talking straight to her and only to her, all his anger gone, only worry and vehemence left.

“Michelle, c’mon, let me take you some-where. Listen, you gotta blow this guy. He thinks he’s big stuff. You know what he wants.”

Soul gave a single snort of unper-turbed laughter.

“Michelle, *please*.” Robbie was beg-ging her, he was pleading, and she could hardly believe it; entreaties were not his style. “I know you’re smart. Think what you’re doing. This guy’ll hurt you and never even notice.”

Though no longer angry, she told him, “You had your chance, Robbie. Butt out.”

“Michelle —”

“Hey, Robbie.” With two careless fin-gers Soul pulled a packet of white powder from his tux breast pocket. “You seem to be a nice kid.” Just the slightest leer on *nice*. “Here, I’ll make you a peace offering. This is for you to get lost with.” He slipped it into Robbie’s rented cummerbund, patted it. At the sight of the stuff Robbie’s face had changed. He looked dazed, unfocused.

“I want you to remember I tried,” he said to Michelle.

Suddenly she was furious at him again, this time because he was giving up.

“Get out of my life, Robbie Diehl!”

She turned her back on him. Soul pulled her into his arms. “Lady in Red” was playing, and they were slow danc-ing, swaying to the music. The crowd on the floor was thinning as couples slipped away, and Michelle felt scared and daring and alive all over, thinking about what was next. She belonged to none of the cliques; she had not been invited to a party, a bonfire. She would be on her own. Out in the country some-where, probably.

“Ready?” Soul asked her softly.

“Yes.”

In the white rumbling Thunderbird she snuggled against him and thought about how he had kissed her already to get it out of the way. About how his lips had felt. About him. About who the Hell in fact he was.

She said quietly into the silence, “You’re all of them. Elvis and Buddy Holly and oh, I just don’t know, all those guys who did sex and drugs and rockandroll and died young.”

He said just as quietly, “Not Buddy Holly. He was different.”

“But the others.”

“Yes. Morrison and Hendrix and a hundred others who burned out fast.” He kissed her hair. “Lay your head in my lap if you want to.”

She did, curling her feet up on the seat, feeling the hard muscle of his thigh swell against her cheek as he worked the accelerator. The boning of her dress had begun to hurt her; she could hardly wait to take it off. She said into the darkness under the dashboard, “You’re still rebels. You’re supposed to be dead.”

“Don’t think so much.” He turned into a dirt lane and slowed the T-bird, stopping in the shadow of a woods. She sat up, then when he came to her door got out to walk with him. He put his arm around her. Over the other he carried a blanket he had brought out of the trunk. Quite a Boy Scout. Prepared.

“Moonlight,” he murmured as they came out of the woods into a luminous hilltop meadow.

“Has it been awhile?”

“Yes.”

“It’s hard for you to be real? When you’re on the air you don’t bother with the body?”

“Shhh.” He hushed her by taking her elbow, turning her toward him and kissing her.

A different sort of kiss, this. Just as expert, but far more urgent. Like his dancing, it was potent, primal and utterly confident. With equal confidence his hands took charge of her shoulders, the arch of her back, the tilt of her breasts. And she wanted him. She wanted him. She wanted him never to stop, what girl would not want a dream lover like Soul for her first time, and there would be no condom, no danger of anything — yet the part of her that never stopped thinking, thinking, saw everything about him in that ecstatic moment as a whole, a pattern, and she knew with panicked gunsight clarity that he had to stop.

“Soul.” She pushed him to arm’s length; her voice was a whisper, almost a sob. “No. Don’t make me love you.”

He obeyed her. In the moonlight she could see his beautiful face, shaken. His hands reached toward her head, did not quite touch it.

“Michelle.” His voice, a breath like hers. “Shel.” No one had ever called her that. “Who’s making who love who?”

“Listen.” She stepped back. “Just lis-ten to me. I figured it out, why you came. Prince in a white car. Gave me gifts. Carried me away to fairyland.” She was crying without noise, the tears shining on her face. “It’s love you want, isn’t it? You crave love like a junkie. Growing up the way you did, it made you compulsive, a gambler for love. Doesn’t matter whose. Could be any-one’s. Mine will do.”

“Shel —”

“You know girls like me, the plain ones. You know what you can make me do.”

“Shel, what are you thinking? I would never hurt you!”

“I know that!” She stamped her foot, anguished, wishing she could sing to him what she needed to say; words alone were such clumsy plodding things. “Soul, I know Robbie’s wrong. Some people you might hurt. Not me. Don’t you see? It’s not me I’m trying to save. It’s you.”

He grew as still as the night.

“A few more kisses and I would love you, adore you, worship you — and isn’t that what has always destroyed you?”

She had thought it out until she could almost see it happening: the superstar singing his heart out in his terrible need, *love me, love me*, and the many lovers tearing at his clothes, his face, his hair, drunk and riotous on wine of his sacrifice, wanting to eat him like communion bread, swallow him whole. But he would go on singing, *love me, love me*, until finally in despair of ever loving him enough the lovers would cry *Crucify him, let him die*.

Soul turned half away, staring off into the west. After a while he said faintly, “It’s not the love itself that fin-ishes me. It’s — the hunger.”

“Can you separate them?”

“No. Desire in me, it’s like a monster. Never gets enough. It’s a fire that feeds on itself.”

“Until there’s nothing left.”

“Yes.” He turned to her with a stark look. “Why do you want to save me? I’ve never wanted to save myself.”

She stood with the tears drying on her face. “Because you’re beautiful,” she said. “That’s all.” Hoping he would always be beautiful and knowing he would

never be wise; he would never change, never grow, never learn. Knowing that for his own sake she must not let him touch her again.

“You’re very different,” he said softly, scanning her as if to memorize her. “You see through me. I’ve never met anyone like you.”

“I almost blew it,” she told him. “I think you’d better take me home right away.”

He reached into a pocket, handed her something that jingled like money: his keys. “Take the Bird and go,” he said. “I’m not as strong as you.”

“You want me to just leave you out here?”

“I’ll fade in a few hours. So will the T-bird. Better hurry. I want very much to kiss you.” He kept his hands clenched at his sides.

She left, turning once to wave good-bye, looking back once more when she got to the white car. He stood on the hilltop in the moonlight, watching steadily after her.

Driving, she grew conscious that she was shivering, and covered her shoulders with the maribou wrap that had lain all night abandoned by his gear-shift. Back home, she parked the car around the corner from her house but kept the keys, hiding them in her evening bag as she walked to the door. Her corsage, she noted, had wilted. All the lights were on, bright; her mother was waiting up for her.

“Where have you been? The prom ended two hours ago!”

“Just driving around and talking, Mom.”

“You should have called. I’ve been worried sick you were with the wrong crowd. Did you hear about Robbie?”

Robbie?

“They had to take him to the hospital. He thought there were lizards crawling on him. Cut himself all over with a razor trying to get them off.”

Robbie —

“Some kind of dope he took drove him screaming crazy.”

Oh, Robbie.

“I didn’t know Robbie took drugs. You are not to see him again, Michelle, do

you hear me? I don't want you going near him anymore. I'm so glad you found a nice boy to take you to the prom tonight. Did you have a good time, dear?"

She pleaded weariness, went upstairs and got out of the red gown, leaving it on the floor. Then she lay on her bed but did not sleep. When dawn started to light her room she got up and picked up the gown so her mother would not yell at her, and emptied her fancy eve-ning bag. The Thunderbird keys were not there. Sometime they had dissolved into air.

Before her parents were up she called the hospital. No, it would not be possible for her to see Robbie Diehl. She could send him a card care of the psy-chiatric ward. His condition was stable. No, he was not expected to be released anytime soon.

She went back to bed, keeping her eyes closed when her mother opened her door to offer her breakfast. Since she had been up late her parents ate and went to church without her. She did not have to deal with them until Sunday dinner, when she told them as little as she could.

In early afternoon her phone started to ring. Tiffany, Denise, Nicole, all sounding shocked and pale. No one, least of all Michelle, wanted to talk much about the Soul of Rock and Roll; it was all Robbie, Robbie, Robbie who would never be the same. Midafter-noon, dazed, Michelle found herself lift-ing the receiver yet once again and this time listening to Apryl sobbing.

"It's —all —my —fault."

"No, Apryl, not really." Michelle had little use for Apryl, but truth was truth. Apryl had not given a packet of white powder to Robbie.

"You don't know," blurted April be-tween wet sounds. "I made him — take me to the prom. I told him I'd — I'd k-k-kill myself if he didn't —"

Robbie, you sap, why did you fall for it?

"— so he did. But you're the only one he — he cares about. You were — you were straightening him out, and then I had to come along and mess him up again. If I'd just let him alone none of this would have happened."

In a weird way that was true. If Rob-bie had taken her to the prom he would never have met the Soul of Rock and Roll.

Sundays were always long. So peace-ful, quiet, smiling, virtue-imbued. This was the longest Sunday of all. Michelle avoided her parents, wore her oldest jeans for comfort.

That evening at nine sharp, as if an alarm had gone off, she shut herself in her room and turned on her radio.

“HEL-lo, lovers, this is the Dedication Hour, and the Soul of Rock and Roll is ready to hear you bare your hearts.”

She would never in all her life forget that voice.

“And for once I’m going to bare mine.” His tone changed, in that cha-meleon way he had, completely. “To-night every love song I play is dedicated from me to Michelle.”

She waited, listening, lying on her bed with one hand to her lips. Knowing he wanted her to call him. Knowing what would happen when she didn’t.

He took all the usual syrupy requests — with something less than his usual mouthy flair, she noticed. He sounded subdued tonight. Muted, like an old guitar. She pictured him out there in the night somewhere, in a metal tower, suspended in a limbo between earth and sky. Bodiless in darkness.

“Michelle,” he said into that dark-ness, “the last song tonight is all for you. If you’re listening, Shel, or even if you’re not, this is yours alone. Straight from the Soul.”

*Lady you see right through me
You get to me
You undo me.
Lady I’ve never felt so melted
Never been so broken into
As by you
My Lady of Love.*

Like “Lord of the Fly,” it was not a song she had ever heard before. She had an idea where they both came from. If all those blaze-of-glory-gone-by rockers could get together enough juice to ma-nipulate telephone wires and airwaves and generate themselves a wet-dream body, they could get together enough to make music. She imagined they had one Hell of a band.

The song faded into ads. Her phone rang.

Knowing her parents were planted on the sofa and would not answer it, she let it ring four times, until the first yell sounded from downstairs, before she answered it.

“Hello?”

“Shel.”

It was him, as she had known it would be, and it would take maybe one more hour together for her to fall in love with him. And not too many days after that for the finiteness of her love to destroy him by way of his infinite need. She said quietly, “Yes, I was lis-tening.”

“Shel, I mean every word of it. You’ve got me down on my knees. I’ve never — nobody’s ever understood me before, nobody’s ever played it straight with me the way you do. Please. I’ve got to see you again.”

Had to see her again or he’d live. And living was growing. And he couldn’t have that, could he?

He said into her silence, “Shel, I’m begging you.”

In the shadows behind her eyes she heard Robbie screaming. She said, “All right. Yes.”

“Milady. Thank you.”

“Come tomorrow, Milord. Be Axl Rose, okay? In a new Corvette. Candy-apple red.”

She would skip school in the wanton spring weather. As Robbie lay strait-jacketed and sedated in a darkened hos-pital room, somewhere out in the honeysuckled countryside she would take the Soul of Rock and Roll and unzip him utterly.

Before she went to bed Michelle painted her nails scarlet.