

Taylor Bell

### The Search for Ronald Jones

The summer after I turned sixteen, I wanted to drive everywhere. Every single night, after the moon had moved across half the sky, after everybody else had gone to bed, I would go pick Nolan and Hunter up from their houses and we would drive across town to the trailer park where Brandon lived. Brandon, Nolan, and Hunter had all been friends since they were in elementary school, but I had only become friends with them because I once told Nolan that I played guitar and listened to Ozma in a freshman class I had with him and he had interpreted it as a misplaced sense of camaraderie; like anybody that listened to indie pop had to form a legion against all other archetypes of people and music. Brandon's mom owned a standard double-wide among porch dioramas and birdbaths and yards that were more dirt than grass. The trailer had a tree growing straight up through the carport that they had to regularly maintain a hole for. We would bring our guitars over and sit in Brandon's room or on his porch trying to learn how to play The Unicorns, Modest Mouse, and The Pixies until Brandon's mom told us to learn Richie Valens or shut up. She never minded how loud we were, as long as it was something that she enjoyed. Discouraged, but still restless, we would then pile into my old Altima, go to the gas station down the street and buy energy drinks so we could drive until the sun rose and use the cans to create makeshift bongos. Sometimes they didn't work, but it wasn't important. The most important part was that Nolan (who always insisted on riding shotgun) would bring different CDs for us to listen to on our spiderweb drives through Dallas and Fort Worth.

On one particular night, after Brandon had made a successful bong out of an oversized Monster can, Nolan pulled an orange CD out of his bag and shoved it into my car's player. I rolled the windows up, and everyone got quiet as the album began. The first lines, over a droning mellotron note, were sung in a haunting high falsetto voice, hitting their stride just as you thought they would curdle:

*“Well it took some time, cause it's a lot. God, it's a bunch. It's such a big, old, black golden buzz”*

The words flowed right into my ears, sunk down into my stomach, and pulsed through my blood until my knuckles turned white on the wheel. They were daunting; spoken so sincerely that it was impossible not to listen. I was immediately entranced, and wasn't paying close attention to the road—I was swerving on and off the shoulder like a drunken gymnast on a balance beam. The voice was deceptively alleviating, provoking a soft juxtaposition between the crunch of the guitar, the fuzz of the bass, and the energy of the drums. There were noises like I'd never heard before—sounds I didn't even know were possible.

“What is this?” I asked Nolan.

“I just heard it a couple days ago. *Clouds Taste Metallic* by The Flaming Lips.”

I listened in silence for a few moments.

“This is fucking brilliant,” I muttered, as we rushed past edifices, facades, buildings, and houses, under the close compendium of flickering highway headlights and street lamps. We listened to the whole album in the same repose as the city, and then we listened to it again before everyone arose with the sun, overflowing onto the roads with the morning light.

That was the first time that I had ever heard The Flaming Lips, or the guitar playing of Ronald Jones. I fell asleep on Brandon's couch that night, but as soon as I woke up the next day I took the CD home, burned it to my computer, and listened to it over and over for the rest of the Summer. The music that the guitar made was completely estranged from anything else that I'd ever heard before. It wasn't grunge or punk or metal or even rock. It was an entirely unique blend of heavy distortion and psychedelic effects that, as I'd later learn, nobody had ever come close to recreating. All of the notes wove in and out of each other like an intangible knot. It had a way of slicing through my skin, and casting my brain back and forth in between empty and occupied space. Whoever the man that created these sounds was, he quickly distinguished himself as a deity in my mind. I set out upon a solemn investigation to discover who this man was, and how he did it.

Most humans have a contravening tendency to create idols, false Gods, in a kind of way to set goals for themselves. The most inherent desire they possess is to be like somebody else. Their ultimate achievement is the exact imitation of something in the besides—something unoriginal, but equally gratifying. They elevate the ordinary, or the eccentric, to extraordinary and grandiloquent proportions until any shortfall of mirrored exploits becomes a sin. They spend hours, days, and years attempting to justify their obsessions through countless repetition and worship. But the curse of imitation is that, however flattering, it never fully culminates into the catharsis that people hope for. It spirals out of control, or fades, or decays before they reach that creative release. Then they must punish themselves. They sit and brood and cry and curse themselves for their inability to replicate and subsequently create, and when it's all over, they are left feeling worse than they did at the beginning. At least, that's how I felt when I was younger.

After that first time I heard Ronald Jones play guitar, I listened to the album over and over, taking

mental notes on every note he played and how it sounded. I went to Guitar Center and searched on Craigslist for every kind of effects pedal I could find for my collection. I spent that entire Summer saving money from my job as a lifeguard to buy things that would bring me closer to becoming like Ronald. My first pedal was a boss DX-1 distortion pedal that added extra gain the tone of my guitar—sometimes rendering the notes completely indistinguishable. Everything I played, right or wrong, instantly popped out of the amplifier and came alive in front of me. The week after that I bought a phase-90 pedal that bent sound waves back and forth until I felt like they were going to break. I could finally play some of my favorite songs off of Clouds Taste Metallic, even if they weren't quite as precise as Ronald's sound made them. Then I bought a Vox pedal (as made famous by Jimi Hendrix) and a cheap Holy Stain pedal that came with a beautiful tremolo. The Vox pedal, when I stepped on it, brought the notes in and out of focus, making them sound like they were saying “wah wah wah” when you played. Then the tremolo broke the notes apart, punctuating the rhythms with rapier, precise breaks in every nanosecond. I converted one of my father's old suitcases into a pedal board—complete with velcro fastenings, two levels of finished plywood shafts, patch cables, and a myriad of sound collage waiting to be discovered. I obsessed over the sounds Ronald made in songs like “Lightning Strikes the Postman” and “Guy Who Got a Headache and Accidentally Saved the World.” I noticed how smoothly he transitioned from chord to chord and note to note and so I bought a glass slide and learned to play glissando guitar. I tried to make the chords converge together, but they stumbled over each other and my hand couldn't move fast enough, or I would accidentally press too many strings down. Nothing I ever played sounded quite the same as Ronald's playing, no matter how hard I attempted to imitate the sounds. I got so frustrated after the Summer was over that I gave up. I decided to convert to a minimalistic style: no pedals, no effects, just a clean, straightforward sound. I practiced scales, listened to a lot of Led Zeppelin, and let the shoebox that I'd put all of my pedals in collect layers of dust.

The story of Ronald Jones seemed enough in itself to pique my interest as a teenager. He became famous with The Flaming Lips after one of their songs, “She Don't Use Jelly” garnered national attention on alternative radio and talk shows. His completely unique and abstract style of guitar playing was inexplicably captivating for anybody who heard it, especially people like me—who were looking for something uncommon to set themselves apart from everyone else. To me, he was a shepherd, humbly calling upon me to spread the word of the miracles he had created. He was a carpenter of sound, crafting

completely unique pieces that fit together like an Escher painting. What made him interesting though, was his legacy. After The Flaming Lips became famous, or well-known enough, he abruptly quit in 1996 after only five years in the band. Apparently, he had developed a crippling case of agoraphobia (the fear of open spaces) and acute schizophrenia. The band had been playing shows without Ronald for months, and it was becoming harder to even get him out of his house. Coupled with this, the drummer, Steven Drozd, was addicted to heroin at the time, oftentimes disappearing for weeks without notice. The band came to odds over the situations at hand and Ronald left without any closure or definite reasons, making *Clouds Taste Metallic* the last album that he appeared on. Since then, Steven went to rehab for his addictions and took over as guitar and keyboard player. He picked up where Ronald had left off, and carried out his legacy to a fault. Virtually nobody heard from Ronald for fifteen years though. Everything he had created, with and without a band, vanished under a cloak of anonymity and mystery. I felt like it was wrong for some things, so profound in nature, to remain buried, so we decided to try and resurrect them.

This past summer, five years after I had first heard *Clouds Taste Metallic*, and sixteen years after it had been released. Nolan, Hunter, and I decided to find out what had happened to Ronald Jones. Hunter came from a relatively affluent family. I'd spent a couple weeks the previous summer staying in a villa his father owned in Costa Rica, and then a week that winter hunting on the fifty acres of land that his father owned in west Texas. His brother owned an entire arsenal of film and documentary equipment that he let us borrow for our project. We got together and mapped out how we were going to go about finding him and what questions we were going to ask people that we talked to.

Our first interview was going to be in June at a small club in Norman, Oklahoma. Wayne Coyne, the lead singer of the Flaming Lips, had a nephew named Dennis Coyne who was in a band that was playing a show that night. We knew we could talk to him afterward because we were bringing our friend Ashley, who knew Dennis through an intimate encounter they had shared the last time his band was in town. We made the enervating three hour drive, fueled by caffeine and coffee all the way to club, and waited patiently through their set, which included a cover of "Psychiatric Explorations of the Fetus With Needles," a song off of *Clouds Taste Metallic*. We waited for Dennis to finish packing all of his and the bands' equipment into a van before we asked to interview him. He made unmistakable eye contact with Ashley, and an immediate swell of color rushed to his cheeks. He sheepishly approached our group, and

exchanged an awkward hello with Ashley and introduced himself to us. We let them talk for a minute before we decided to tell him why we were there.

“We're planning on making a documentary about Ronald Jones,” Hunter blurted out. “Everyone was kind of wondering whether you had any interesting stories or information about him that we could use for the film.”

Hunter never had the best judgment for timing. He was a streamliner; always trying to get things over with before they had even really begun.

“Well...” Dennis paused, “I haven't seen him in ages. I was really young when he was in The Flaming Lips. I don't really know hardly anything about him.”

We all pretended to act interested, even though on the inside we were beginning to adjust to the imminently familiar notion of dejection, the undeniable reality that even the people we thought were the closest to Ronald Jones didn't know anything about him.

“Do you have any stories to tell about him, anything you remember from when you were young?” Nolan asked.

“Actually,” Dennis replied, “I helped Ronald and Wayne write 'Psychiatric Explorations of the Fetus with Needles’”

Suddenly everybody was a bit more interested.

“It was so long ago. That's kind of the reason why I feel like it's okay that we still play that song, because they never do. Wayne and Ronald came over to babysit me when I was about eight or so,” he started. “I remember telling Ronald all about how I was being bullied in school and how I thought I didn't fit in. He smiled and laughed and tried to make me feel better by playing guitar. Then Wayne joined in, and I still remember when they wrote those lyrics:

*They beat you up*

*They make you leave*

*Sticking needles in your knees*

*Knowing God will be pleased*

*Should make it easy”*

Everyone was now watching Dennis intently, mouths slightly agape; Imagining what it must have been like, almost twenty years ago, in a living room in the suburbs of Oklahoma City, helping to write what I believed to be some of the most impressionistic and memorable music of the late twentieth century. I

never said anything, but I felt the slightest tinge of hatred for Dennis, being such a privileged person, yet recounting everything as nonchalant, as if it wasn't supposed to happen any other way—like it could have just happened to anybody. I thought about how hard I had practiced to be like Ronald Jones, and here was this man, heir to an empire, who had spent his entire childhood in and out of ungrateful contact with one of music history's most enigmatic figures, and he didn't even bat an eyelash at the brilliance or extraordinary circumstances that he had been thrown into. I secretly glared at him with contempt.

Everyone thanked him for his time though, and we all drove back home with swelling hearts and pride for our successful first interview. We stayed up late that night, looking at footage and planning our next interview, which was going to be Wayne Coyne himself in Dallas the following week.

Preparations were made, but nobody could truly anticipate the almost apocryphal events that would follow that night. Nolan, Hunter, and I familiarly piled into my worn out Altima and made the forty five minute drive to a record store in Dallas where Wayne was conducting an in-store promotion, a kind of meet-and-greet, of a new split The Flaming Lips had done with another band. We had decided not to bring any cameras, but instead to just ask a few basic questions to see if it would merit another interview in a more personal setting. There was a line out the door of people waiting to shake his hand when we got there. We had purposefully arrived late though, and let the few people who arrived after us go in front, earnestly making ourselves the very last people to talk to him. Colorful posters adorned all the walls, people were buying last second merchandise to have signed, and an unshakable air of restlessness perturbed the entire scene. We waited for over two hours, patiently rehashing the questions we were going to ask when we finally reached the table that he sat at. When the time came, we all walked up together, hands unsettlingly empty, but Nolan and Hunter did all the talking. We shook his hand, introduced ourselves, and Hunter wasted no time.

“We were wondering if you knew anything about where Ronald Jones is now.”

Wayne looked at us, quizzically at first, but then more desolate as the seconds passed. He was tired from shaking so many hands, and he was clearly fighting an internal battle between strokes of his ego and an undeniable humility.

“I'm not sure really sure that he wants anybody to know that,” he stated in an almost hushed tone. I didn't know how to react, so I waited for somebody else to say something.

“We're collecting footage for a documentary about him,” Nolan continued.

“Ron's an uncommon individual,” Wayne said. “He's not like me. Or you. Or you,” he exclaimed,

pointing at me. I laughed nervously, because I wasn't sure what he meant. A few moments passed, before anyone said anything.

“So you still talk to him?” Hunter asked.

“Sometimes.”

“Do you know where he is now?” Hunter continued

“Ron...” Wayne paused for a moment before continuing, “Ron...is probably still in the basement of his parents' house—making the greatest music nobody has ever heard before.”

We stood for a few seconds, hesitantly complacent with the answer Wayne had given, but not sure if he was going to continue.

“Listen,” Wayne said. “I'd be happy to help you guys with whatever it is you want to know, but I can't tell you that Ron would be okay with any of this.”

He told us that there was a reason nobody has talked to him for so long. That Ronald doesn't want to be reached. He talked about how people fuck up, and people don't fuck up, but it doesn't even matter, because pride or modesty are even bigger. They eclipse actions, and they linger a lot longer in memory.

“That's why he's still in Oklahoma, not making a sound; because he doesn't *want* to be reached.” Wayne said. “If you guys are serious about this though—and it looks like you are—I'll talk to him about it. To be honest, I'm a bit curious myself.”

Our eyes lit up. Wayne grabbed a flier from a stack sitting on the corner of the table beside him, and scribbled something quickly on it and handed it to Hunter. He took it and Wayne got up, shook our hands and abruptly left.

We walked back to the car in silence. When we got inside, Hunter showed us the flier. Wayne had written his number on it, and said to call him whenever we were in Oklahoma City if we wanted any more information.

A couple weeks passed before I heard anything about the documentary. We had hardly gathered any footage, and we hadn't planned anything else. Then Hunter called me one day in August, elated, and told me to pack an overnight bag because we were going to Oklahoma City in the morning. Of course I willingly obliged, and as I began to fully open my eyes, we were driving past the same buildings and landscapes that we had passed on whimsical nights five years ago. On the drive there, I asked him what exactly our plans were. He said that he had talked to Wayne and that Wayne had talked to Ronald about

our film. Ronald didn't seem to mind that we wanted to interview him, and he said he was okay with us driving to his house for it. Something in my stomach turned over, because I felt uneasy, a mixture of anxiety and excitement, for the rest of the car ride. We had brought the film equipment in case we needed it, but Hunter wanted us to talk to him without cameras first—to make sure that things would even be recordable. We had an address, and we were wasting no time in going directly there; a small town, sparsely populated, right on the fringes of the city. We didn't eat, or even stop, for the entire drive. Hunter and Nolan were in a frenzy, making mad preparations of questions to ask, and playing out different scenarios between themselves, going over every question and answer that could possibly arise. I sat in the back, pensively contemplating my strange place in the universe. How life seemed to unfold in my palms, somehow like the highways before us—patient and tranquil; smooth and always without question. I-35 is an invariably unremarkable drive, but something was oddly captivating about it that day. Even among the overcast clouds, the dreary, humid air, the abrasive billboards, and the scarcity of diversions, we were all excited.

We drove through Oklahoma City first, then took a series of winding, and unrelatable turns back out of it and into antiquated, run-down neighborhoods. Trees hung over the roads, potholes were interspersed throughout the streets, shirtless children splashed in inflatable front-yard pools, mothers spectated from behind cigarette smoke and screened porches, and we drove until we reached a house not unlike the ones that surrounded it.

There was an old, rusted emerald Sedan parked in the driveway. The exhausted house was coated in chipped white paint, and finished with faded sky-blue trim around the windows. There were inoperable storm shutters halfway covering drawn shades, and a single dead willow tree lay wilting in the front yard. We parked along the cracked curb, and got out hesitantly. The block was quiet, save for a small murder of crows perched on a power line downwind.

“This is it,” Hunter said, as we all stood in front of the old house.

“It's exactly what I didn't want to expect,” Nolan sputtered. He spit his gum out into the sewer behind our rear tire.

We drifted towards the house, apprehensive but unfaltering, drawn towards it by some invisible magnetic pull. Our hands were empty, but we still kept them deeply buried into our pockets. Hunter went first, and every piece of wood on the steps ached and moaned as he put his weight on it. Nolan and I followed, walking like we were stepping over landmines until we reached the front door. Something scuttled in the

floorboards beneath us. The faded door donned a monogrammed, brass knocker that simply stated “Jones.” We stared at it for a long time without saying anything. A small wind chime hanging above the balcony began to pick up and it played a short atonal tune before dying back down. There were faint laughs from children in backyards somewhere down the block. I wiped my brow, trying not to look up, and then, without a sign, we all looked at each other with depressed, sober eyes.

“I don't want to do this,” I sighed.

“Neither do I,” Nolan agreed

Hunter didn't say anything, but he looked down at the floorboards, the rotting wood, the augury of age, the overwhelming question of action, and nodded in accordance. We turned around, and crept down the steps, as if silence at this point would make it seem like we were never there in the first place.

We all walked back to the car not saying anything. The Summer heat was beating down our backs, and the crows were “kaw”-ing at us, as if they were goading us to go back up to the door and give it a quick knock to see what would happen, or poking fun at us for our ineptitude. Suddenly, it seemed like the faint laughter of the children in the backyards was directed only towards us. We climbed in, embarrassed. Hunter silently started the car, and drove us all the way back home. We hardly said anything for the entire drive.

I still ask myself if we should have knocked on that door; If I would have had some grand mystery revealed to me, or if I would have even been better off knowing everything that happened. It's a dangerous thing to confuse disease with genius, and I didn't want to provoke an upset in that balance. My entire perception of Ronald Jones existed on a fragile striation that could have shattered with one inscrutable truth. In candor though, it's impossible to know if anything would have changed, but I kind of liked the enigma. I liked the legacy of tortured idiosyncrasies, and I liked for eccentricity to remain endearing, not debilitating. It was those few simple traits that had led to my infatuation with Ronald Jones, and if I had uncloaked the truth behind them, it could have easily disparaged the years I had spent trying to be like him.

When we got back home, I walked straight into my room and dug into my closet until I found my old shoebox of dusty pedals. It was two or three in the morning, and everyone in the house was already asleep. I went down into the converted garage and, for old times' sake, tried to play along with a couple

of my favorite songs from *Clouds Taste Metallic*. I hooked up all my pedals, slid the glass tube over my pinky, and plugged my guitar in. I was doing better than I had ever done before, keeping up with all the polished transitions and peculiar scales. I had gotten through most of the album and kept up with almost all of “Psychiatric Exploration of the Fetus with Needles” until the very end when the chorus began to repeat. The guitar crescendoed and roared, as effects built upon effects until they all swirled together in a cacophonous splendor. I still couldn't recreate the final sound that Ronald shaped when he left an unresolved D chord, distorted and beautiful, lingering over the final line of the song:

*“And though it's hard to believe, it makes it easy.”*