

# Thrumm

## Steve Rasnic Tem

*Probably the most prolific and versatile writer of short stories currently active, Steve Rasnic Tem has sold over 170 to date, tackling horror, mystery, science fiction and western themes, but always somehow slipping his own personal touch into the interstices between genres. This, like much of his best work, is kind of a horror story.*

*Steve writes: 'In my personal mythology, rock and roll has always been the herald of change, the secret mirror which shows us that we are not solely the person we've told everyone we are, or even the person we've told ourselves that we are. Rock and roll alerts us to a mysterious self inside ourselves, another life waiting to happen. That's much of what "Thrumm" is about, really, and it charts pretty accurately my own musical interests and obsessions. I grew up in one of those pockets of poverty in the Southern US where rock was virtually unavailable except for a couple of distant top ten stations. The local music was too primitive even to be called "country": hillbilly music comes as close as anything. I've since come to appreciate those primitive country tunes I grew up with, but back then they were an irritation, a constant reminder of how I didn't fit in. Another music played in my head. An expanded sense of rock and roll coincided with my drive to get out of my home town and into the world at large, where I hoped to find my other life, and my own true voice.*

*'Not being immersed from the beginning in the music made my developing tastes somewhat off the mainstream at times, leading to what some might consider an inordinate interest in the careers of such musicians as Link Wray. I don't think it was rock lyrics which drove me in my quest. For me the true draw of rock, the movement into strange new realms of experience, occurs somewhere between the words, perhaps in the pauses themselves. Perhaps that's one reason I still prefer vinyl over CDs - I like hearing the scratches and the static, the same static and distortion I so fondly recall from years before. This belief has had an influence on my writing style as well. Mood and abstract tone have become very important in my writing, and at the same time I believe at their best these elements are hard to learn, impossible to imitate. Because I think the tone of a piece actually resides somewhere in between the words, in the mysterious spaces, in the static'*

*And so 'Thrumm,' in which a search for the meaning in the soundscape behind the music leads straight to hell . . .*

\* \* \* \*

**A**

*re you feelin' sick?*

He used to dream of a music that would set him free.

*Are you feelin' mad?*

Sometimes it began as a thrumm in the background of a dream, and exploded into flying birds' wings, soldiers crying as they shot their muzzles full of fragmented insect parts into the wide-open mouths of dead infants.

*Are you feelin' anything?*

Sometimes he knew there was another self in him, a monster hiding there, that could be tamed only by acknowledging its existence, which most of the time he wasn't willing to do. But every time he ran away from it, every time he stopped looking at it, it took over.

Even in his most coherent dreams the sound was just out of reach, awash in a cascade of chords or obscured by the background noise of his own voice complaining of some pain or fear. In fact it often seemed that his favourite music - and the favourite music of so many - was simply amplified complaints. He was convinced that if he could but isolate that music and hear it clearly, such complaints would no longer be relevant, pain would no longer be relevant, because the resultant vibration would bring him so deeply down into his secret self that even the pain might be celebrated, because it was so very much his own.

*Then put a knife into dad dad dad . . .*

He never really knew his father, who had been a man of infrequent and violent visitations.

'Don't let me catch you with that music, boy! Don't let me catch you!'

His father was in charge of the rules, no matter where he was. He

didn't allow music in the house, and Rex's mother, out of fear or habit or indifference to the melodies, followed through with the stricture.

*Tell them what you think! Tell them what you feel!* 'Where'd you get that radio? You *know* what your father would say!' *Tell them every one what's real!*

'What'd I tell you? What'd I *tell* you!' His father's face in his face, but his father's face so red and enormous it seemed to have no clear boundaries. 'You know what that music will *do* to you, boy? Can you even guess?' *Tell them tell them tell them!*

His last memory of his father was of an official-looking car parked out in front of the house, men in uniform milling around and leading his father out to the car all bound up in canvas and straps. Then his father looking up at Rex's upstairs window, staring at Rex, screaming 'Tell them!' over and over.

Much later he would find out that his father spent the last years of his life in one of those 'facilities'. *Tell them!* He would hear scattered rumours of murders, and worse, over the years, but nothing conclusive. *Tell them!* Sometimes when his mother was unhappy with Rex, she'd tell him that he was beginning to act just like his father. *Tell them your secret name!*

'Don't lock me in the closet, Ma! There's no food in here! You'll go off drinkin' and forget about me! I just know it!'

'You talk to me with respect! You talk to me with that mad in your voice and I ain't got no choice but to lock you in there!'

'Ma! Ma, I gotta use the bathroom!'

'You should've thought of that before. The way you been talkin' to me. You must think you're somethin' else!'

*The way you love me really makes me wanna scream . . .* With some songs you'll always remember where you were when you first heard them. 'I Need Your Loving', 'Strawberry Fields', 'Purple Haze', 'My Girl'. Sometimes the words or maybe the tune, or more often both, were such a perfect match to what it was you were going through that you started thinking that the song had made it happen. The song made you fall in love or out of love or made you beat up that guy that time at the dance after homecoming. It wasn't just the words - sometimes the tunes themselves

seemed to say things to you that weren't in the words of the songs at all. The Stones, the Beatles, Wilson Pickett and Stevie Ray Vaughan all had this direct line into your head and they were just pumping the voltage on through, raising the volume until your hands and feet were jumping.

*Tear this whole place down!*

It was while his momma had him locked in the closet, all those years ago, that he'd first heard the thrumm in his head, in his heart, and in the music that filtered down through the cracked and peeling ceiling.

He used to think the music had put the thrumm into his head. *Don't you know I'd never lie to you?* But now he knew the music was an echo, a litmus test, a reflection, a xerox copy, a microphone slipped down into the centre of the soul. It reverberated with what it found, amplified and broadcast it for everybody else to hear and see.

The Rolling Stones playing 'Sympathy for the Devil' hadn't caused the violence at Altamont, any more than 'Helter Skelter' had sent Manson's groupies out the door with knives in their hands. Something else had, and the music had pointed it out.

That was why it was so important to listen to the music. For those all-important dispatches straight from the secret self.

*What you need . . . what you see ... is something else!*

The music had something to point out in Rex, too, something scary. He thought he'd better find it before he did something that made Altamont and the Manson murders look like sweetness and light. Something else was in him, all right, some kind of big bad thrumm, and he had to find that thrumm something before it was too late.

Sometimes in his dreams Screamin' Jay Hawkins sang and danced naked holding his dick in his hand.

July, 1952: He was twelve years old and locked in his room and the old guy in the apartment above theirs had been playing this funky old beatup guitar about six hours straight.

'I'm gonna kill that old fucker!' his momma had screamed outside his door.

'You like the music?' he had whispered to himself. 'Yeah, it's food.'

Years later Rex would recognise some Otis Rush, John Lee Hooker, and T-Bone Walker in what the old man had been playing, but back then it was just the way the sounds seemed to reach down into his belly and rasp against his bones, and the way a certain vague sound, a shadow note that floated behind the blues riffs, a thrumm down his backbone that made him feel the closest he'd ever been to outright, uncontrolled craziness.

There had been good in that feeling, energy and life and a jitterbug in the feet, but also this: a quick fantasy of bashing his mother over the head with that old guitar and then strangling her with the strings.

*Yah-ya-yaya-yayayaya-yeah!*

The power of that fantasy, the sense that he had it in him to do such things, got him to listen to every song, new and old, coming out of the radio. Listening for the sound, listening for the thrumm that would bring on the fantasy, and the presence of something else. Preventive medicine. As long as he couldn't get to that something else there wasn't much he could do to change it. Over the years he would sharpen his listening skills considerably, but the trail of those notes would remain subtle and elusive. *Tell them! Tell them that you bleed!*

One morning when he was in the closet Rex realised that something must have happened to the old man who lived upstairs, because he wasn't hearing the music any more.

*When you can't hear the notes . . . when you can't hear the song . . .*

'Ma! What'd you do, Ma? I can't hear the music, Ma!'

But there was no voice on the other side of the door. He found himself straining to hear even the hoarse, alcoholic snores his mother made two-thirds of every day, but there was nothing, no sound, no voice, no music. *Can't you hear it? Can't you hear it?*

What he could hear, instead, after hours alone in the dark, was a distant thrumm, a discordant series of notes, a harsh semblance of a voice painful to hear and terribly familiar.

'Ma, please! Ma!'

When he finally heard her steps outside the door she still would not answer him. He thought it might be because after his long hours in the dark his voice had changed - now there were thrumm and clang and rough edges in it, a throat full of dust and a tongue crawling with bugs to rearrange the syllables his mouth tried to speak.

'Rex . . .'he finally heard - a soft, hoarse voice tense and hesitant.  
'Rex, is that you?'

His answer was lost in a dark explosion as his fingers tore apart the door and the jamb. His mother spent two months in the hospital and based on her information everyone said it had been a prowler that did it, maybe two or three. His mother didn't lock him in the closet after that. Sometimes he put himself there for hours at a time, but he always took his radio.

1958: He'd just turned eighteen and although he'd been too big for his momma to force into the closet for some time it still felt like he'd just gotten out, like this was the first daylight he'd seen in years. There was thrumm in his voice and a strong backbeat in his walk when he went to school or parties or just tried to get to know other kids his age. He knew he was wound way too tight for safety but he couldn't see anything to be done about that except to pray for minimal hassles when the spring finally broke.

A lot of the music he'd been hearing that year was pretty above-ground, walking-around-with-your-best-suit-on, take-it-to-meet-your-parents kind of stuff. And yet most of it made him feel like he wanted to kill somebody, slit them open and crawl inside for the winter just to keep warm. *Baby pleaaaaaasssse don't go!*

That year he got his first strong trace of the sound he was looking for, in an instrumental by a fellow named Link Wray, 'Rumble'. A gravelly electric guitar growling out two minutes and thirty-six seconds of one of the meanest sound-ing tunes he'd ever heard. It was the first instance of that distorted, fuzz-tone guitar sound he knew of. Wray achieved the crackle and burr with a hole punched through one of his amplifier speakers. In the liner notes for Wray's '74 album none other than Pete Townshend would write about being made 'very uneasy' the first time he heard it.

Wray had a voice to match that guitar - years later Rex would describe it as Jagger and Captain Beefheart ripped open and then bleeding into Robbie Robertson - he had a voice with the thrumm in it, and Rex followed the rasp and chew of that sound through songs like 'Super 88', 'It was a Bad Scene', 'Walkin' Bulldog', 'She's That Kind of Woman' and 'I Got to Ramble' (dedicated to the memory of Duane Allman). Legend had it that his

session men would stomp the floor and beat on pans for a drum beat while recording in Wray's three-track shack. He believed it, and even in his middle years Rex sometimes found himself stomping and rattling the kitchenware while listening religiously to albums like 'Jack the Ripper' and 'There's Good Rockin' Tonight'.

Sometimes Wray's sound would grab him with the thrumm, and Rex would feel the need to lock himself up in his room like Lon Chaney in one of those old werewolf movies. What he felt at those moments wasn't exactly anger, but a kind of manic, transforming high that made him want to get to the centre of things, the centre of people. He wanted to hold their still-warm hearts in his hands.

He met Ellen at a car rally his senior year. She was one of those girls who always wore pastel sweaters with matching silk scarves around the neck. His friend Jim said it was to hide all the love bites the football team had given her, but Rex always pictured a deep slash across the throat. He imagined removing the scarf in the throes of passion, anxious to nibble there, and Ellen's head falling off into his lap.

'Turn off the radio, Rex,' she said and sighed, rearranging herself on his lap and squirming, pushing her chest forward. 'It *distracts* me, honey.'

But the DJ was playing 'Rumble', and the steady thrumm of it had him well caught up. 'I can't,' he mumbled, and moved his lips over her ear.

'What do you mean you *can't*?' Ellen's voice shifted into her grating, thirty-plus-years-and-too-many-kids mode. Rex heard her mother and her grandmother, too. He reached over and switched it off. She sighed contentedly and leaned over his shoulder, rubbing her hands up and down his back. 'Thanks, baby.'

Ellen hummed tunelessly in his ear, reaching under the edge of his shirt and drawing her nails up his spine in a jerky back and forth rhythm. Rex felt that rhythm working through his flesh and into the bone, felt a fuzzy vibration shaking itself out of the tangles of distant memory, heard the strain and the thrumm of it backing his father's voice *Tell them! Tell them, son!* singing with his eyes filled with the vision of dozens of naked and dead young girls. 'Oh, Ellen,' he whispered, but it was his father's voice, his father's song on his lips as he pressed his hands on either side of her neck and started to press as hard as he could.

'Jesus, Rex!'

He stopped and looked at her, then jumped out of the car and ran.

Rex ran up the hill as hard as he could, past the old mill and along the narrow edge of the ridge and despite the intense pain in his chest he felt no fatigue, only a growing exhilaration as the music built in wild abandon inside him, an oddly irritating, moronic tune which years later would remind him of Oingo Boingo and the way it made you want to snap your head back and forth idiotically as if the neurons were exploding. *Tell them! Tell them! Tell them!*

Eventually he made his way back to his car and his radio. Ellen wasn't there, no doubt gone off with some other guy from the rally. Rex switched the radio back on, but - unable to find Link Wray again, or any other tune angry enough to do the trick - he pushed the dial to the far end where disgruntled static and garbled messages from distant points on the globe reigned. In that region he found comfort for the burn in his head, an antidote for the other Rex who sang the blood songs he was so desperate to run away from, and he drove through that country until dawn.

May, 1964: Rex had been using drugs since his freshman college year and it seemed to him now that the thrumm had become a bit more ethereal, a little more religious, both in the music and in the lifestyle. People talked about going back to Mother Nature, going back to the sea, going *someplace else*, and in that someplace else, Rex thought, there would be no secret other self fucking you up and causing you no end of nightmares.

'Rex? Rex, honey, don't!' the women would say when he cried watching them die from the chemicals they were throwing down their throats and pumping into their arms. *Tell them!*

Link Wray had another, softer country-gospel side as well: 'Fire and Brimstone', 'God Out West', 'Take Me Home Jesus', the kind of music Rex had never much cared for, but he understood all too well how essential that periodic return to a safe and simple, funky philosophy was once you got within a nail-scratch of the sound. The thrumm could make you religious as hell. Look at Little Richard. Sometimes Rex wondered if Jimmy Swaggart had heard the thrumm, too, just like cousin Jerry, and found it too much to bear.

*Tell them what you heard! Tell them what you feel!*

The boys of Pi Kappa Alpha were a sadistic bunch, but they threw a good party. He didn't fit in, but this seemed to be a fraternity for guys who



didn't fit in. After the initiations of the past few days - guys lying naked on the floor and farting directly into each other's noses, guys with their jock straps full of mustard and hot sauce, guys paddled so hard their rectums bled, guys with their ears scraped raw from Brillo pad ear muffs - *I believe in murder! I believe in love! I believe in torture! I believe in love!* - vast quantities of illicit drugs seemed the only appropriate response.

But some drugs cut out the music completely, leaving him alone in a silent world with only his father's red face for company. *Tell them!*

'Hey, man. Hey, man, you okay?' His friend said more - Rex could see his lips moving - but he couldn't hear a word beyond the hiss and thrumm welling up inside him.

'I have to hear the music,' Rex said, but I can't.'

And then that other Rex came out, and his friend's face grew redder and redder, looking more and more like his father's face, and by the time the cops got there many of his brothers wore his father's wet, red face.

*You can't hide me! You can't avoid me! I am your sweet, red loverrrrrr...*

December 1969: Rex was twenty-nine, and the endless graduate student (English or History, depending on the year), and about to be kicked out into the real world. He had no marketable skills. He worked part-time at the local record store listening for the thrumm and pushing personal favour-ites like Wray off on younger college kids. It had been a year of demonstrations and local bands playing 'In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida' endlessly in the park for seriously stoned audiences. It had also been the year girls at an all-women's college in the next town were getting murdered in their beds.

'Something else, is that you, cuttin' up?' he'd ask in a haze of dope. *Tell them! Tell them! Man you're somethin' else!*

Sometimes something else would answer. Sometimes not.

Sometimes Rex would fervently pray that the music continued as long as he needed it.

In the seventies the thrumm was buried in the precise guitar work of Roy Buchanan, but it was still there. It still growled.

Now and again it occurred to him, of course, that the singers and musicians truly capable of producing the chord he was looking for were dead. Hendrix, aspirating his vomit in 1970. Morrison, dying of a heart attack in his bathtub at age twenty-seven, 1971. Janis, TRex, maybe even Mama Cass or Ricky Nelson. Others, no doubt, who had died before anyone had even known about them. Or maybe they *had* found the chord, worked to achieve it or stumbled across it by accident, and that was what had killed them.

'Is that you, Daddy?' he said to his image in the mirror. The image sang *Tell them!* but Rex didn't understand what it was he was supposed to tell. *Tell them!* Rex thought that the face in the mirror was the face of his own violent death.

Through the eighties he traced bits and echoes of the sound through a variety of bands: Chelsea and Oingo Boingo, Athletico Spizz 80 and the Dead Kennedys. The vocalists in these groups all projected at least the shadow of the sound he was looking for, a shadow that could even be glimpsed occasionally in the simple-minded dementia and masturbatory self-indulgences displayed by such as the lead singer for the Cramps. Although he could never quite get into heavy metal, he had to admit there was a strong strain of the sound throughout Metallica's 'One'.

Sometimes he'd trace the sound in and out of an EMs Costello whine or the demented laments of Echo and the Bunnymen. Sometimes in the gravelled voice of a singer like Joe Strummer, the shadow came very close to revealing itself. He always thought the Clash sounded their best when they were at their most distorted. Sometimes he'd tape and retape 'Dictator', 'Dirty Punk' and 'We Are the Clash', playing with the controls to maximise the distortion - sounding as if it might have been recorded at the bottom of a garbage disposal - while still maintaining some semblance of the original. He'd stop the tape at every hint of the thrumm, back it up, and play this isolated bit over and over, but the thrumm was a tease - it receded too quickly into the background to capture.

Something was happening in the music, though. It was still rock, still the same basic sound, but he felt the gradual evolution in it, a change that he was sure would some day bring his sound, his thrumm, out into the open. For a while he'd sneak into the clubs and stand at the back watching them pogo or slam dance. Then one morning he just shaved his head and that night he joined them down in the pit in front of the stage, circling and turning and slamming into people, shoving them away, crouched and ready as if he was fighting but it wasn't fighting at all, at least not usually. After a

few weeks people got to know you and helped you up when you took a particularly bad fall. With his head shaved he lost years, he actually looked almost the right age, but when he eventually tried jumping off the stage he couldn't twist himself into those safer angles the young punks managed, and he broke his left arm. The next week-end he was back in the pit circling with a sling, but he never tried stage diving again.

He hit his late forties with his head still shaven, but he'd kept his weight down and with just the right amount of makeup he didn't look much older than the rest of them out on the dance floor. The best thing about it was that he could feel just the edge of the thrumm, go with it, crash into somebody and then feel as if he'd faced that something else without really hurting anybody else in the process.

He got married, had three kids, but continued to follow the thrumm through the music and on the road.

The face in the mirror grew steadily older, more like his father's face. *Tell them what, Daddy?* But when the mirror spoke Rex didn't understand the words.

For a time during the late eighties Rex followed Stevie Ray Vaughan on the road, his anxiety rising steadily from the time he heard the first notes out of Ray's '59 Fender Stratocaster tuned to E-flat, crescendoing when the guitar master pumped the wah-wah pedal for the beginnings of Hendrix's 'Voodoo Chile (Slight Return)'. When Vaughan jammed, or engaged in a cutting contest with a Clapton or a Cray or a Beck, Rex would leave the theatre shaken.

When Stevie Ray's helicopter dropped into the ground, Rex left the road and concert halls and eventually all the late nights prowling the record stores for hidden gems. He spent more time with his wife and kids, and kept the thrumm of his life to himself, in his head.

*Tell them, son. Tell them what it's like.*

When Rex awakened it was as if from a dream that had lasted for years. He stood and saw himself in the mirror attached to the back of the bedroom door: his father looked out at him, but older than Rex remembered him: his hair hippy-cut long, streaked with grey, his grizzled beard eating away at the lower half of his face, his belly pushing out and spreading open his pyjama top.

In his head, the thrumm rang clearly, reverberating down through his bones. He didn't need a radio; he'd mixed the sound in his dreams.

The longer he gazed at the mirror, the leaner and meaner the image of his father became. Shadows ran up his arms and across his face, masking him in grey and black. His teeth grew long and curved. His eyes burned white with the glow of the other Rex's passion, the intelligence of some-thing else again.

It just needed to be seen. Once heard in the song, it lost its danger.  
*Tell them! Tell them, son. Tell them what they are.*

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