

THE JAMS

I don't care much for rock music when I first hear it. I find this out in the classroom that next fall, when one of the tough kids brings in a 45 RPM record for Show and Tell. Before class, there are rumblings and talk between the desks that David Wagner has brought in a record with swearing on it and is going to trick our teacher into playing it in front of the class. The record, from what I can gather, says the word "motherfucker" on it.

The idea of this terrifies me and makes me want to run home to confess something to my mother. I have heard this word before from Matt and Jim, yet I somehow fear that having it uttered in the classroom will cause a breakdown of the whole system. Afterward, surely David Wagner and the other bullies who torment me daily will kill our teacher, Miss Berlin, then take over the classroom.

During this time, I'm the only boy in the class to win multiple citizenship awards and I feel as though I have to do something because I am an official upstanding student citizen. (Me up on stage with dozens of girls, grinning over the great honor about to be bestowed upon me, not knowing that it will make me a target for every tough kid in the school. When the tauntings begin, the hat stealings, the book up-endings, the lunch money muggings, I still won't understand why it happens.) Yet I can't bring myself to approach Miss Berlin in front of everyone, or even raise my hand to tell her that she is about to play a recording that features curse words and will very possibly incite a riot. And I fear the pounding I will surely take by David Wagner, Billy Zimmerman, and the other tough kids in my class, so I keep my mouth shut.

A giant tank-like record player is rolled in, set up and plugged in by a boy from the AV club.

David Wagner stands up before the class. When he says, “I have a new record that I want to play for the class.” I can feel the tension in the classroom. David pulls the record out of the sleeve and holds it up. The label is black and red and white with a yellow insert wedged in the hole in the middle. He leers at the class, making a big show of placing the record on the ashy brown felt of the spinning turntable.

“And what is this record called, David?” asks Miss Berlin.

I sit in my desk frozen, feeling awful about how I am letting Miss Berlin and the American educational system down by allowing all this to happen.

“It’s called *Kick Out The Jams*, Miss Berlin.”

Miss Berlin nods, not sure what exactly to make of it, but happy that someone is bringing something they like into class. “And who’s the recording artist?” she says.

“The MC5,” says David.

She smiles at the class, her smooth white skin and “That Girl” bouffant offset strangely by a slightly oversize and stationary glass eye. (No one knows how it had happened, but that eye defines her for most of us.)

“All right then, class. David is going to play his record called—” She looks at him for confirmation. “--*Kick out the Jams?*”

David smiles deliciously and nods, then places the needle on the record and with a lurid glance toward the class he reaches over and turns up the volume all the way. The sizzle of amplified vinyl fills the room until a voice booms out of the speaker. Suddenly, the class is thrust into the middle of the Grande Ballroom, roughly six miles down Grand River from our school. “Right now, right now...” There is a smattering of applause and electricity crackling in

the air, which reminds me for a moment of the Drags. A loose occasional note from a guitar.

“Right now it’s time to...”

And the whole class somehow knows it’s coming.

“Kick out the jams, *brothers and sisters!*”

There’s a collective sigh of disappointment from the class. A singular sigh of relief from yours truly. There will be no breakdown of the system that day. The music is very loud only for a moment until Miss Berlin turns down the volume by more than half. The music is noisy and raucous and angry and it scares me. Miss Berlin does not seem pleased. After a minute of music, she turns it off, takes the record off the turntable and thanks David who slinks back to his desk.

I’m happy when it’s over, but something about the music stays with me, haunts me in a way. At the time I don’t think much of it or about it, until later, when I’m in the basement building the model cars. It crosses my mind that the music I hear on my stations is not at all like what I heard today in class. Just as quickly, the idea evaporates and I continue to sing along to *My Green Tamborine*.