

Turntables of the Night

by Terry Pratchett

Look, constable, what I don't understand is, surely he wouldn't be into blues? Because that was Wayne's life for you. A blues single. I mean, if people were music, Wayne would be like one of those scratchy old numbers, you know, re-recorded about a hundred times from the original phonograph cylinder or whatever, with some old guy with a name like Deaf Orange Robinson standing knee-deep in the Mississippi and moaning through his nose.

You'd think he'd be more into Heavy Metal or Meatloaf or someone. But I suppose he's into everyone. Eventually.

What? Yeah. That's my van, with Hellfire Disco painted on it. Wayne can't drive, you see. He's just not interested in anything like that. I remember when I got my first car and we went on holiday, and I did the driving and, okay, also the repairing, and Wayne worked the radio trying to keep the pirate stations tuned in. He didn't really care where we went as long as it was on high ground and he could get Caroline or London or whatever, I didn't care where we went so long as we went.

I was always more into cars than music. Until now, I think. I don't think I want to drive a car again. I'd keep wondering who'd suddenly turn up in the passenger seat . . .

Sorry. So. Yeah. The disco. Well, the deal was that I supplied the van, we split the cost of the gear, and Wayne supplied the records. It was really my idea. I mean, it seemed a pretty good bet. Wayne lives with his mum but they're down to two rooms now because of his record collection. Lots of people collect records, but I reckon Wayne really wants - wanted - to own every one that was ever made. His idea of a fun outing was going to some old store in some old town and rummaging through the stock and coming out with something by someone with a name like Sid Sputnik and the Spacemen, but the thing was, the funny thing was, you'd get back to his room and he'd go to a shelf and push all the record aside and there'd be this neat brown envelope with the name and date on it and everything - waiting.

Or he'd get me to drive him all the way to Preston or somewhere to find some guy who's a self-employed plumber now but maybe back in 1961 called himself Ronnie Sequin and made it to number 152 in the charts, just to see if he'd got a spare copy of his one record which was really so naff you couldn't even find it in the specialist stores.

Wayne was the kind of collector who couldn't bear a hole in his collection. It was almost religious, really. He could out-talk John Peel in any case, but the records he really knew about were the ones he hadn't got. He'd wait years to get some practically demo disc from a punk group who probably died of safety-pin tetanus, but by the time he got his hands on it he'd be able to recite everything down to the name of the cleaning lady who scrubbed out the studio afterwards. Like I said, a collector.

So I thought, what more do you need to run a disco?

Well, basically just about everything which Wayne hadn't got - looks, clothes, common sense, some kind of idea about electric wiring and the ability to rabbit on like a prat. But at the time we didn't look at it like that, so I flogged the Capri and bought the van and got it nearly professionally re-sprayed. You can only see the words Midland Electricity Board on it if you know where to look. I wanted it to look like the van in the 'A-Team', except where theirs can jump four cars and still hare off down the road mine has trouble with drain covers.

Yes, I've talked to the other officer about the tax and insurance and MOT. Sorry, sergeant. Don't worry about it, I won't be driving a car ever again. Never.

We bought a load of amplifiers and stuff off Ian Curtis over in Wyrecliff because he was getting married and Tracey wanted him at home of a night, bunged some cards in newsagents' windows, and waited.

Well, people didn't exactly fall over themselves to give us gigs on account of people not really catching on to Wayne's style. You don't have to be a verbal genius to be a jock, people just expect you to say, 'Hey!' and 'Wow!' and 'Get down and boogie' and stuff. It doesn't actually matter if you sound like a pillock, it helps them feel superior. What they don't want, when they're all getting drunk after the wedding or whatever, is for someone to stand there with his eyes flashing worse than the lights saying things like, 'There's a rather interesting story attached to this record.'

Funny thing, though, is that after a while we started to get popular in a weird word-of-mouth kind of way. What started it, I reckon, was my sister Beryl's wedding anniversary. She's older than me, you understand. It turned out that Wayne had brought along just about every record ever pressed for about a year before they got married. Not just the top ten, either. The guests were all around the same age and pretty soon the room was so full of nostalgia you could hardly move. Wayne just hotwired all their ignitions and took them for a joyride down Memory Motorway.

After that we started getting dates from what you might call the more older types, you know, not exactly kids but bits haven't started falling off yet. We were a sort of speciality disco. At the breaks people would come up to him to chat about this great number they recalled from way back or whenever and it would turn out that Wayne would always have it in the van. If they'd heard of it, he'd have it. Chances are he'd have it even if they hadn't heard of it. Because you could say this about Wayne, he was a true collector - he didn't worry whether the stuff was actually good or not. It just had to exist.

He didn't put it like that, of course. He'd say there was always something unique about every record. You might think that this is a lot of crap, but here was a man who'd got just about everything ever made over the last forty years and he really believed there was something special about each one. He loved them. He sat up there all through the night, in his room lined with brown envelopes, and played them one by one. Records that had been forgotten even by the people who made them. I'll swear

he loved them all.

Yes, all right. But you've got to know about him to understand what happened next.

We were booked for this Hallowe'en Dance. You could tell it was Hallowe'en because of all the little bastards running around the streets shouting, 'Trickle treat,' and threatening you with milk bottles.

He'd sorted out lots of 'Monster Mash' type records. He looked pretty awful, but I didn't think much of it at the time. I mean, he always looked awful. It was his normal look. It came from spending years indoors listening to records plus he had this bad heart and asthma and everything.

The dance was at . . . okay, you know all that. A Hallowe'en dance to raise money for a church hall. Wayne said that was a big joke, but he didn't say why. I expect it was some clever reason. He was always good at that sort of thing, you know, knowing little details that other people didn't know; it used to get him hit a lot at school, except when I was around. He was the kind of skinny boy who had his glasses held together with Elastoplast. I don't think I ever saw him raise a finger to anybody only that time when Greebo Greaves broke a record Wayne had brought to some school disco and four of us had to pull Wayne off him and prise the iron bar out of his fingers and there was the police and an ambulance and everything.

Anyway.

I let Wayne set everything up, which was one big mistake but he wanted to do it, and I went and sat down by what they called the bar, ie, a couple of trestle tables with a cloth on it.

No, I didn't drink anything. Well, maybe one cup of the punch, and that was all fruit juice. All right, two cups. But I know what I heard, and I'm absolutely certain about what I saw.

I think.

You get the same old bunch at these kinds of gigs. There's the organiser, and a few members of the committee, some lads from the village who'd sort of drifted in because there wasn't much on the box except snooker. Everyone wore a mask but hadn't made an effort with the rest of the clothes so it looked as though Frankenstein and Co had all gone shopping in Marks and Sparks. There were Scouts' posters on the wall and those special kinds of village hall radiators that suck the heat in. It smelled of tennis shoes. Just to sort of set the seal on it as one of the hotspots of the world there was a little mirror ball spinning up the rafters. Half the little mirrors had fallen off.

All right, maybe three cups. But it had bits of apple floating in it. Nothing serious has bits of apple floating in it.

Wayne started with a few hot numbers to get them stomping. I'm speaking metaphorically here, you understand. None of this boogie on down stuff, all you could hear was people not being as young as they used to be.

Now, I've already said Wayne wasn't exactly cut out for the business, and that night - last night - he was worse than usual. He kept mumbling, and staring at the dancers. He mixed the records up. He even scratched one.

Accidentally, I mean - the only time I've ever seen Wayne really angry, apart from the Greebo business, was when scratch music came in.

It would have been very bad manners to cut in, so at the first break I went up to him and, let me tell you, he was sweating so much it was dropping on to the mixer.

'It's that bloke on the floor,' he said, 'the one in the flares. '

'Methuselah?' I said.

'Don't muck about. The black silk suit with the rhinestones. He's been doing John Travolta impersonations all night. Come on, you must have noticed. Platform soles. Got a silver medallion as big as a plate. Skull mask. He was over by the door.'

I hadn't seen anyone like that. Well, you'd remember, wouldn't you?

Wayne's face was frozen with fear. 'You must have!'

'So what, anyway?'

'He keeps staring at me!'

I patted his arm. 'Impressed by your technique, old son,' I said.

I took a look around the hall. Most people were milling around the punch now, the rascals. Wayne grabbed my arm.

'Don't go away!'

'I was just going out for some fresh air.'

'Don't. . . ' He pulled himself together. 'Don't go. Hang around. Please.'

'What's up with you?'

'Please, John! He keeps looking at me in a funny way!'

He looked really frightened. I gave in. 'Okay. But point him out next time.'

I let him get on with things while I tied to neaten up the towering mess of plugs and adapters that was Wayne's usual contribution to electrical safety. If you've got the kind of gear we've got - okay, had - you can spend hours working on it. I mean, do you know how many different kinds of connectors . . . all right.

In the middle of the next number Wayne hauled me back to the decks.

'There! See him? Right in the middle!'

Well, there wasn't. There were a couple of girls dancing with each other, and everyone else were just couples who were trying to pretend the Seventies hadn't happened. Any rhinestone cowboys in that lot would have stood out like a strawberry in an Irish stew. I could see that some tact and diplomacy were called for at this point.

'Wayne,' I said, 'I reckon you're several coupons short of a toaster.'

'You can't see him, can you?'

Well, no. But . . .

. . . since he mentioned it . . .

. . . I could see the space.

There was this patch of floor around the middle of the hall which everyone was keeping clear of. Except that they weren't avoiding it, you see, they just didn't happen to be moving into it. It was just sort of accidentally there. And it stayed there. It moved around a bit, but it never disappeared.

All right, I know a patch of floor can't move around.

Just take my word for it, this one did.

The record was ending but Wayne was still in control enough to have another one spinning. He faded it up, a bit of an oldie that they'd all know.

'Is it still there?' he said, staring down at the desk.

'It's a bit closer,' I said. 'Perhaps it's after a spot prize.'

. . . I wanna live forever . . .

'That's right, be a great help.'

. . . people will see me and cry . . .

There were quite a few more people down there now, but the empty patch was still moving around, all right, was being avoided, among the dancers.

I went and stood in it.

It was cold. It said: GOOD EVENING.

The voice came from all around me, and everything seemed to slow down. The dancers were just statues in a kind of black fog, the music a low rumble.

'Where are you?'

BEHIND YOU.

Now, at a time like this the impulse is to turn around, but you'd be amazed at how good I was at resisting it.

'You've been frightening my friend,' I said.

I DID NOT INTEND TO.

'Push off.'

THAT DOESN'T WORK, I AM AFRAID.

I did turn around then. He was about seven feet tall in his, yes, his platform soles. And, yes, he wore flares, but somehow you'd expect that. Wayne had said they were black but that wasn't true. They weren't any colour at all, they were simply clothes-shaped holes into Somewhere Else. Black would have looked blinding white by comparison. He did look a bit like John Travolta from the waist down, but only if you buried John Travolta for about three months.

It really was a skull mask. You could see the sting.

'Come here often, do you?'

I AM ALWAYS AROUND.

'Can't say I've noticed you.' And I would have done.

You don't meet many seven-foot, seven-stone people every day, especially ones that walked as though they had to think about every muscle movement in advance and acted as though they were alive and dead at the same time, like Cliff Richard.

YOUR FRIEND HAS AN INTERESTING CHOICE OF MUSIC.

'Yes. He's a collector, you know.'

I KNOW. COULD YOU PLEASE INTRODUCE ME TO HIM?

'Could I stop you?'

I DOUBT IT.

All right, perhaps four cups. But the lady serving said there was hardly anything in it at all except orange squash and home-made wine, and she looked a dear old soul. Apart from the Wolfman mask, that is.

But I know all the dancers were standing like statues and the music was just a faint buzz and there were these, all these blue and purple shadows around everything. I mean, drink doesn't do that.

Wayne wasn't affected. He stood with his mouth open, watching us.

'Wayne,' I said, 'this is-'

A FRIEND.

'Whose?' I said, and you could tell I didn't take to the person, because his flares were huge and he wore one of those silver identity bracelets on his wrist, the sort you could moor a battleship with, and they look so posey; the fact that his wrist was solid bone wasn't doing anything to help, either. I kept thinking there was a conclusion I ought to be jumping to, but I couldn't quite get a running start. My head seemed to be full of wool.

EVERYONE'S, he said, SOONER OR LATER. I UNDER-STAND YOU'RE SOMETHING OF A COLLECTOR.

'Well, in a small-' said Wayne.

I GATHER YOU'RE ALMOST AS KEEN AS I AM, WAYNE.

Wayne's face lit up. That was Wayne, all right. I'll swear if you shot him he'd come alive again if it meant a chance to talk about his hobby, sorry, his lifetime's work.

'Gosh,' he said. 'Are you a collector?'

ABSOLUTELY.

Wayne peered at him. 'We haven't met before, have we?' he said. 'I go to most of the collectors' meetings. Were you at the Blenheim Record Fest and Auction?'

I DON'T RECALL. I GO TO SO MANY THINGS.

'That was the one where the auctioneer had a heart attack.'

OH. YES. I SEEM TO REMEMBER POPPING IN, JUST FOR A FEW MINUTES.

'Very few bargains there, I thought.'

OH. I DON'T KNOW. HE WAS ONLY FORTY-THREE,

All right, inspector. Maybe six drinks. Or maybe it wasn't the drinks at all. But sometimes you get the feeling, don't you, that you can see a little way into the future? Oh, you don't. Well, anyway. I might not have been entirely in my right mind but I was beginning to feel pretty uncomfortable about all this. Well, anyone would. Even you.

'Wayne,' I said. 'Stop right now. If you concentrate, he'll go away. Settle down a bit. Please. Take a deep breath. This is all wrong.'

The brick wall on the other side of me paid more attention. I know Wayne when he meets fellow collectors, They have these weekend rallies. You see them in shops. Strange people. But none of them as strange as this one. He was dead strange.

'Wayne!'

They both ignored me. And inside my mind bits of my brain were jumping up and down, shouting and pointing, and I couldn't let myself believe what they were saying

OH, I'VE GOT THEM ALL, he said, turning back to Wayne, ELVIS PRESLEY, BUDDY HOLLY, JIM MORRISON, JIMI HENDRIX, JOHN LENNON. . .

'Fairly wide spread, musically,' said Wayne. 'Have you got the complete Beatles?'

NOT YET

And I swear they started to talk records. I remember Mr Friend saying he'd got the complete seventeenth-, eighteenth-

and nineteenth-century composers. Well, he would, wouldn't he?

I've always had to do Wayne's fighting for him, ever since we were at primary school, and this had gone far enough and I grabbed Mr Friend's shoulder and went to lay a punch right in the middle of that grinning mask.

And he raised his hand and I felt my fist hit an invisible wall which yielded like treacle, and he took off his mask and he said two words to me and then he reached across and took Wayne's hand, very gently . . .

And then the power amp exploded because, like I said, Wayne wasn't very good with connectors and the church hall had electrical wiring that dated back practically to 1800 or something, and then what with the decorations catching fire and everyone screaming and rushing about I didn't really know much about anything until they brought me round in the car park with half my hair burned off and the hall going up like a firework

No. I don't know why they haven't found him either. Not so much as a tooth?

No. I don't know where he is. No, I don't think he owed anyone any money,

(But I think he's got a new job. There's a collector who's got them all - Presley, Hendrix, Lennon, Holly - and he's the only collector who'll ever get a complete collection, anywhere. And Wayne wouldn't pass up a chance like that. Wherever he is now, he's taking them out of their jackets with incredible care and spinning them with love on the turntables of the night . . .)

Sorry. Talking to myself, there.

I'm just puzzled about one thing. Well, millions of things, actually, but just one thing right at the moment.

I can't imagine why Mr Friend bothered to wear a mask.

Because he looked just the same underneath, idio - officer.

What did he say? Well, I daresay he comes to everyone in some sort of familiar way. Perhaps he just wanted to give me a hint. He said DRIVE SAFELY.

No. No, really I'll walk home, thanks.

Yes. I'll mind how I go.