



The Fremont Street Experience

Gareth Stack

Night falls in the desert, and I take over the driving. The road appears, post by reflective post, straits and dips and tight turns, Death Valley invisible on either side. We stop the car and I walk out into the desert until the road disappears. I look up into the sky, still a little red from the cities ahead and behind, but alive with the streak of Milky Way and the dust of blinking stars which gradually develop colours.

Back in the car we see what looks like Vegas, far ahead of schedule, and wake up suddenly, shaking and straightening our seat backs. Then something strange happens. Instead of congealing, the mess of lights separates as we approach, becoming a grid of isolated buildings, rooftops lit as if to impersonate a city from the air. A few casinos,

large and cold, but certainly no Vegas. This is Pahrump, a shadow of a town, a slim satellite imitation of the city in the desert, a night-place that has no purpose but to sit on the outskirts of nowhere, sparkling like fool's gold in the desert.

When we finally we hit 'the real' Vegas, at 4am, having driven 300 miles during the night and overshot Death Valley altogether. I clutch my discount motel guide like a talisman. It's Friday night in the city, Bike Fest is on, and all the rooms are shut. At last we find a manger, the unbranded Motel, which is clean and quiet, with beds bigger than we need and a mammoth television. After we check in, I stand on our balcony and try to squint the dawn into something glamorous. Here, just a few blocks off the Strip, we're

already in the desert.

Next day we take a cool drag up the Strip, and park at the least intimidating hotel we can find. We drive straight in. There's nowhere to take a ticket, so we follow the labyrinthine route back to the roadway entrance. In the hot white Nevada sun we speak with an old security guard, edgy in a grey moustache and holster.

'How much to park? Where do we pay?'

' 's free', he says, 'Long as you spend some time in the casino.'

'How much time?' we ask, bemused.

'What happens if it's not long enough? Can we wander the strip?'

'Just spend some time in the Casino', he replies cryptically. 'You're gone too long, you're towed. We don't care where you go. Long as you spend some time in the Casino.'

This interminable Beckettian ambiguity continues until we wander back into the car park, find a lift up to the hotel proper and

leave by the front door, still nervous about the rented car. We walk the narrow pavements of the strip, angled to tip you into resorts, teeming with tourists and mildewed spaghetti-western Mexicanos who assail us with their paper bills - miniature pornography, adds for girls who seem impossibly cheap. Tracy and Virginia, \$26 dollars an hour for the pair, no hidden charges, direct to your motel room door. A tall athletic guy, handsome in that bland all American way, is grabbing each pro-offered bill.

'Collecting them all?' I ask.

He pauses, embarrassed. 'Sure.'

In Ceasar's Palace, an artificial village under a painted sky, I wander into a designer store called John Varvatos, where each jacket could pay for our whole trip. A grizzled balding hipster, inspecting the displays with a proprietorial eye, checks out my \$10 target t-shirt. It reads: 'I've got a blackbelt in crazy'.



'I like that', he says, 'It's one of mine'.

Walking down Main Street on Saturday night I stumble onto Fremont Street, an enclosed pleasure palace which stretches for three blocks all the way up to the centre of the city. Tonight it's Bike Fest - such denotative names here in America - and an Ozzy tribute band are playing. Not Ozzy as he was, but the Ozzy of today, a rambling shambles of a tribute; which is to say an accurate one. At midnight, drunk on a football-shaped beer bucket, I stand under the quarter-mile Viva Vision screen which roofs the 'Fremont Street Experience', watching as it runs through an American medley, from bald eagle to ICBM.

'Fatum Iustum Stultorum', I think: 'Righteous is the destiny of fools.'

In the whoops and applause of the assembled bikers, I finally get this place. The city is as it must be, a safety valve for America's Christian neuroticism. 'Free' strip clubs with an \$18, two-drink minimum, 'limitless' buffets twice as expensive as advertised, slot machines offering 100% or greater payout; everywhere the promise of pleasure, everywhere the sting of deserved pain. Casinos offer the possibility of limitless wealth, synonymous in the American mind with success, success without effort, the American version of equality of opportunity. Everywhere fast foot joints pump out plastic-wrapped fulfillment, with the karmic retribution of obesity and expensive, perpetual ill health. All of it sold under an all singing, all dancing, loud as hell, electric vi-

sion of the American dream.

In Vegas the photos you take are more real than the place itself, the concrete mask of a city literally planted in the sand. Even after all this time, even after the Mormons and the mob and a 'restorification' so complete that Sin City is a trade mark and cannot be used. In Vegas, perhaps more than anywhere else in America, one experiences a bizarre *deja vu* - these mean dusty streets, these glittering lights, these laughing shouting carousing b-boys and homies and preppy college kids - you've seen them all before; bigger and louder, iconographically crystallised in moving images. Vegas really is just any other city, just a sad nest of addiction and prostitution, with a thin skein of plastic glamour and aspiration. An opulent pimp, the city flicks its head and shakes its swollen belly, thrusting its hips into the desert, immune to its own inadequacy.

Leaving Las Vegas, the radio warns us of the danger of Progressive Creationists, lefty nuts who don't accept the literal truth of a seven day creation. On a petrol pump in Ashfork, the screen reads 'God bless and support our troops' as the black blood of Christ fills up the belly of the car. On the TV a local church is being audited for anti-war sermons before the first Persian Gulf distraction - seems it's goodbye charitable status. They should build a Jesus casino here in the desert, what an apposite synthesis that would be. Dancing topless nuns and Lazarus slot machines; the lord giveth, and he sure as fuck taketh away.

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