

# *Last Chicken in the Shop*

by Mike Visceglia

In 1976 I auditioned for and was invited to join a newly formed John Cale Band. The lineup included me on bass, Bob Kulick on guitar, Joe Stefko on drums, and Dave LeBolt on keyboards. I didn't know much about John except that he was in the legendary Velvet Underground. It was an exciting time, as this was going to be my first professional concert tour, something I dreamed about since I started playing. I was going to tour Europe!

John's manager at the time was Jane Friedman. She was the head of a PR firm called The Wartoke Concern and also managed Patti Smith and Television. The offer that was made to me was to go to Europe for two or three weeks at a salary of \$100.00 per week. Yes, you heard it right. The reasoning behind this, Jane said, was that because John was no longer on Island Records, there was no tour support and the tour had to fund itself. I was 22 and wide-eyed. I enthusiastically agreed to the salary.

I went on a plane (for the second time in my life) and landed in Rotterdam, Holland for the first gig. The tour went well and I felt like a professional musician for the first time. When we got back, there was an offer from Jane to continue working with John in the U.S. There were some changes to the band. Bob Kulick was replaced by Richie Fliegler, and Dave LeBolt was replaced by Bruce Brody. The remuneration for this work was to be even less than Europe. The offer was no salary, only \$5.00 per diem. Yes, a total of \$35.00 per week! Jane assuaged my misgivings by saying that if this worked out, this would become the new John Cale band and there would likely be a new record deal, the rewards of which would make up for any sacrifices that we'd have to make in the short term. She referred to this endeavor as a "labor of love." Now, this was the mid-seventies—heady times in music. New York was exploding with the new wave and punk scene, with CBGB and Max's Kansas City as ground zero. We played up and down the East and West Coasts with repeated performances at CBGB. There were crowds there like I have never seen since, with hundreds of people stuffed into the club and scores more waiting outside to get in. There would be guest musicians sitting in with us, like Lou Reed, David Byrne and Ray Manzarek. In New York we would be playing shows with The Talking Heads, Blondie, Patti Smith, and Television. In LA we opened up for Cheap Trick at their first record release show at the Starwood club. In Topanga Canyon the legendary Lowell George sat in with us. We were, by all appearances, doing very, very well. We started working on new songs and rehearsing regularly. I had a feeling that the often talked about but elusive record deal was just around the corner.

In the middle of all this activity in the States, Jane and John decided to take the band back to Europe and, for the first time, the U.K. The year was now 1977 and the monetary offer this time was five English pounds per day, even less than \$35.00 per week. Once again we accepted. I tried to reassure myself that this all would be for the



Mike with John Cale and Lou Reed at CBGB  
Ritchie Fliegler-Guitar, Alan Lanier-Guitar, Lou Reed-Guitar, Joe Stefko -Drums, Mike-Bass,  
John Cale-Guitar and Voice, Bruce Brody-Keys

best, because after all it was a “labor of love.” These were to be John’s first appearances in the U.K. since the breakup of his all-English band of luminaries that included Brian Eno, Chris Spedding, Pat Donaldson and Chris Thomas. The reception for our all-American band was dismal from the start. John—known for his costumes, props and outrageous stage antics—was just standing there strumming his guitar or sitting at the piano and hardly performing the way his English audience was used to. The reviews were awful. We were being compared to his former superstar band and were being blamed for John’s relatively lackluster performances. Jane felt that things needed to change rapidly before he could further alienate his fans and the press. And change they did.

The first change that we noticed was that the new material that we had worked on, and was supposed to be part of the new record, was removed from the set. The next thing that happened was that there were now no lights on anybody on stage except John during the shows. When asked about this sudden and strange occurrence, Jane casually said that she had decided that the band was too *ugly* to be seen on stage with John. Furthermore, she had decided that we were *not* the right band for John after all, in spite of the pitiful salaries and sacrifices that we were making for the sake of the project. As you can imagine, the band was demoralized. Even the soundman, Denny McNerney, and guitar tech, Don Cogliano, knew that things couldn’t get much worse. But things did get worse.

As we were traveling through the English countryside one day on our way to a show in Croydon, the vehicle we were in started making stops at local farms. The tour manager would go out, disappear for several minutes at a time, come back, get in the

van and we'd depart again. This happened several times and the band could not figure out what was going on. At one farm that we stopped at he came back with a fully grown live chicken bound by his feet hanging upside down by his side. We looked at each other in disbelief and shook our heads in silence. When we got to the hotel I called Joe, our drummer, and asked him to please speak to John, as he had the best rapport with him, and try to find out what was happening. He did and was assured that nothing of note was to occur. No harm would come to the chicken. It was all to be in good fun. When Joe told me this, I said that if something untoward did happen it would be the end of the tour and whatever was left of the band, as things were about as bad as they could possibly be. He agreed but felt reassured by John.

Later that night, with great trepidation, we went on with the show. Things seemed as abnormally normal as they had been. No sign of the chicken. We got to the last song of the night, John's meta-goth version of "Heartbreak Hotel." For any of you that don't know the song or John's version of it, the last line, "You make me so lonely I could die," is sung by John in a blood-curdling scream that is sure to get a rise out of the crowd. Well, we got to that point in the song, which was usually about two minutes from the end of the show. Everything seemed uneventful when suddenly he rushed offstage. The band looked at each other with foreboding. John came back onstage with the chicken. Screaming "I could die, die, die," he pulled out a butcher's cleaver, dropped to his knees, and started hacking the chicken to bits. He cut the head off and threw it into the audience. He then swung the fresh carcass around by its legs, spewing blood all over the stage and out into the audience. We looked on in horror. He then threw the chicken's headless body into the audience and walked off stage. It was the end of the show and the end of the band.

Joe the drummer, Denny the soundman, Don the tech and I immediately walked over to Jane and told her that we quit. We demanded our return tickets to New York. She refused. I grabbed my bass but unfortunately Joe's drums were already packed into the equipment truck. He asked if he could take them. He was refused. We all reconvened in my hotel room to assess our situation. As we had no money and, at that time no credit cards, we were virtually stranded in England. Furthermore, fearing reprisals from John for having quit the band in the middle of a tour, the four of us stayed in my hotel room and barricaded the door with furniture. Joe had a friend in London, the American singer and pop celebrity Cherry Vanilla. The plan was to sneak out of the hotel before daybreak, go to Cherry's place, and figure out how to get back to the U.S. We all stealthily left at around 5 AM. Cherry hooked us up with a five-pound-a-night fleabag hotel, where all four of us stayed on floor mattresses in one room the next night. We all phoned home to have airline tickets purchased for us. Things looked relatively back under control with the exception of one thing: Joe didn't have his drums and John, Jane and the rest of the band left for Germany to continue the tour with

pickup musicians. So as we left to come home, Joe had to stay for another two weeks to try to track down his kit. He wasn't able to do so. So he came home.

Back at home no one could believe what we had been through. I went to the International Federation of Musicians Union to file a grievance and seek compensation. Because the tour wasn't contracted through the union (few tours are), we were unable to do so.

A month later Joe got his drums back.

It turns out that the "chicken incident" (as I call it) has become an often talked about and rather infamous episode in the lore of concert touring. I meet people from all areas of the music world that know and still talk about it. There's almost a cult status attached to it. What did I know? After all, it was only my first tour.