



## WHERE'S IZZY: SEARCHING FOR THE GNR REUNION'S MISSING

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Izzy Stradlin now lives where nothing moves. While his old gang reunites for a world tour, the co-founder of Guns N' Roses is semi-retired in California's secluded Mayberry: the quaint Ojai Valley. He's holed up there in a midcentury home hidden behind a wrought-iron gate and hot pink rose bushes; the same hue as the jacket he wore to a Judas Priest concert at the Long Beach Arena in 1984.

This is his Alamo. He leaves it only when the surf report dictates it, or when he needs a new stick, like his flat-top Gibson SJ-200 acoustic, the one that became famous on the cover of Bob Dylan's *Nashville Skyline*, or wrapped tightly under Jimmy Page's mighty grip. It's that or a trip back to his hometown of Lafayette, Indiana, in the middle of nowhere, on a visit to McGuire Music & Sound — where some of his equipment has been up for sale since last October, according to screenwriter John Miller, who's penning a script on the early years of the band.

To his critics, Stradlin is a deserter; to the purveyors of his cult, a purist, an unwilling arena rocker whose integrity was bruised by GNR's success. When he was a no-show at the music video shoot for "Don't Cry," a *Use Your Illusion* power ballad he co-wrote with singer Axl Rose, it was the beginning of the end. "I'm just not into the big production videos," he told his hometown paper, the *Lafayette Journal & Courier* in 1993.

By then, he had long since left the band, disenchanted by Axl's Jagger-esque power play that began in the late '80s, as Stradlin — Izzy, to his fans — was strung-out and losing veto power in the band he had co-founded. In the lead-up to the Monsters of Rock Festival in England in 1988, Axl told a reporter that a band is a "political thing." Izzy never wanted to be like The Rolling Stones — rock's biggest political machine — he just wanted to play like Keith Richards.

"I like to keep it real simple," Izzy said in the same interview with his hometown paper. "Which it wasn't anymore with Guns."

Over the years, Izzy has become my generation's Man in Black. It's both how I've imagined him during his exile, and pieced him together like the lost history of an early 20th century bluesman, from fragments like a video that surfaced earlier this year of him playing an old protest song on that same Gibson SJ-200. "Sunshine go away today," he sings. "Don't feel much like dancing."

In the flesh, Izzy has eluded me. I'm not alone. *The Wall Street Journal* and *Rolling Stone* have prospected for the same interview. I tried to track him down not simply to ask about his absence from the current GNR reunion, but to understand his impetus for leaving GNR in '91, bolting on his own band the Ju Ju Hounds in '94, and building a massive catalog of 11 solo albums that avoid complexity like a Warhol. Songs like "Train Tracks," a bluesy rocker about his teenage years in Lafayette, are Izzy at the height of his songwriting powers. Add Axl Rose's vocals and you could have a GNR song. He's written a lot of those since he left the band.

Then there are the songs that sound like an earnest Rolling Stone pastiche, like "Chop Away." Digging deeper, it begins to feel like Izzy is releasing music to protest the grabbiness of GNR albums like *Use Your Illusion* and *Chinese Democracy*. It can be almost offensively minimalist, like "Concrete," from the album titled *Concrete*, with album art that's literally a slab of concrete.

On "Here Comes the Rain," off 1999's *Ride On*, the only lyrics are "Here comes the rain" — like a grim retort to "Here Comes the Sun." In many ways, Izzy is GNR's George Harrison, the silent type who never got the credit he deserved. Then again, maybe Izzy got *too much* credit. It's an understatement to say that Izzy has never released a masterpiece like Harrison's *All Things Must Pass*. Without Axl and Slash, Izzy's songwriting seemed to become a bit gun-shy.

Someone on the popular [MyGNRForum](#) tells me “Here Comes the Rain” was influenced by Izzy watching the Weather Channel. I believe it. It's that kind of simplicity that has made him a folk hero to GNR fans. It's part of his protest, where his guitar is the only frontman; for his critics, the few that exist, it's proof that Izzy needed the other Gunners to produce a chart-topper.

**Aside from his vast library** of underachieving music, I didn't have very much to go on in my search. Izzy's the only Gunner without a proper biography. The one from 2005, *Dust N' Bones: The Untold Story Of Izzy Stradlin*, doesn't qualify. “I just threw it away after I realized it wasn't something worth reading,” says Jimmy Ashhurst, the former bass player in Izzy's Ju Ju Hounds.

Because of this, and because of Izzy's own reclusive nature, some basic details of his story remain vague. Stephen Davis, author of *Watch You Bleed: The Saga of Guns N' Roses* (a somewhat reputable bio by the author of *Hammer of the Gods*) writes that Izzy was born in Florida, 1962. The same claim is made in the book *Legends of Rock Guitar* by Pete Prown and H.P. Newquist. In 1989, after he was arrested for urinating in the galley of a passenger plane, he bullshitted an FBI agent, saying he was from Idaho. “He's a real jokester,” Georgia Satellites guitarist Rick Richards says.

## *Izzy's great-great-great-great-great-grandfather was Captain Godfrey Isbell...*

The reality is that Izzy Stradlin — real name: Jeffrey Dean Isbell — was probably born in Lafayette, Indiana, on April 8, 1962, east of the Wabash River, at a time when train tracks still ran through the city's downtown. His family has deep roots in Indiana. Izzy's maternal grandmother was born in Bloomington in 1916. His father, an Alcoa plant worker, and his mother, a telephone operator, filed for a marriage license in Tippecanoe County, Indiana, on Aug. 10, 1961. Izzy's father is named Richard Clyde Isbell and there's a man of that name currently registered to vote in Pasco County, Florida, which could explain why some sources connect him to the Sunshine State. But all the verifiable evidence comes back to central Indiana and the city of Lafayette.

Public records reveal that Izzy's great-great-great-great-great-grandfather was Captain Godfrey Isbell, a North Carolina militiaman who fought in the Revolutionary War. During the war, Captain Isbell allegedly murdered a neighbor named John Chapman for trespassing on his land. A warrant for the captain's arrest was issued in 1783, just as America was gaining independence from Great Britain. “Chapman was cutting down a tree on Isbell property,” says Ray Isbell, an amateur historian who's been studying the Isbell family history for three decades. He's Izzy's eighth cousin, once removed, and says Chapman may have been cutting down a Christmas tree.

In attempting to retrace Izzy's musical lineage, Ray directed me to archival information on Izzy's grandfather's half-brother, Joseph William “Little Joe” Isbell, a candidate for Cowboy Yodeler of the Year in *Cowboy Music World*, 1945. “Little Joe” was born in Bloomington Indiana, 1916. There's a June 6, 1953 issue of *Billboard* with a help-wanted ad by “Little Joe,” linked to an Indiana address: “GIRLS FOR HILLBILLY AND WESTERN combo.” Along with a telling disclaimer: “No characters or drunks.” (Around 1984, in the “Seeking” section of the *Recycler*, Izzy placed a similar ad looking for a guitarist that was influenced by Aerosmith and Hanoi Rocks, with its own disclaimer: “No beards or mustaches.”) His paternal grandmother, Elizabeth Adeline Barton, was also a musician, a drummer and member of the High Notes Organ Club in Indiana.

Izzy started on drums, but his real musical awakening came in the form of the Ramones, who appeared on the syndicated TV variety show *Don Kirshner's Rock Concert* on Sept. 19, 1977. "The Ramones were my favorite," he told TuneCore's Jeff Price in 2006. He learned how to play the guitar by listening to Johnny Ramone play rudimentary riffs on tracks like "Judy Is a Punk."

In 1980, when Izzy arrived in Hollywood, he was a better drummer than a guitar player. "I was 18 years old," he told the *Lafayette Journal & Carrier* in 1993. "I got enough money for gas and I got all my stuff. I'm going to get in a band and maybe check out the beach and get some sun." Izzy was a punk rocker with an allergy for aluminum processing, the business of his father and grandfather before him.

Among the torrent of freaks flooding the Sunset Strip, Izzy exuded his own brand of cool. Chris Weber, the former guitarist in Hollywood Rose, the first L.A. band Izzy formed with Axl Rose, describes him like a Greaser living in a world full of squares. "He would smoke cigarettes in this very interesting way. Like it was the '40s or something. He was James Dean to me." That was Izzy, circa 1983, in the parking lot of the Rainbow Bar & Grill, with his sleeves rolled up, part Johnny Thunders, part gypsy, a pot-smoking skater from the Midwest reinventing himself as the coolest rhythm guitar player of his generation.

**Though they were childhood friends,** Izzy and Axl's personalities diverged: the madcap singer, the detached guitarist. On May 13, 1986, at Raji's, a rock club in Hollywood, Circle Jerks singer Keith Morris saw both firsthand: "My friend's girlfriend was drunk at the front of the stage, heckling Axl. So he clocked her over the head with a mic stand. Which is when my friends decided to jump the stage and tear into members of the band." Morris remembers Izzy ducking out of the room, just as Axl was kicking someone. "Izzy saw the train coming and quietly left."

"Bolting is Izzy's defense mechanism," Slash wrote in his memoir. (The Raji's story is corroborated, without mention of Izzy's disappearing act, in the pages of Marc Canter's photographic chronicle of the band's early days, *Reckless Road: Guns N' Roses and the Making of Appetite for Destruction*. Paul Stanley of KISS may have also been there that night.)

So how did Izzy and Axl's Midwestern bromance fade?

One source tells me Izzy discovered heroin in 1983, around the same time he and Axl formed the short-lived Hollywood Rose band. By the time GNR became MTV's most-hyped rock band, circa 1988, heroin had made him increasingly paranoid. "I remember he was living in Sherman Oaks so he could be away from Hollywood, with all these black drapes to keep the sun out," says Ashhurst, who describes the scene like the strung-out John Frusciante interview from 1994, where it looked like flies were swirling around his head. "He had all his dope rolled up in socks and looked like this Gollum creature."



L-R: Izzy Stradlin, Axl Rose, and Chris Weber of Hollywood Rose (1984); Credit: Cleopatra Records

By the time Izzy got sober in 1989, he couldn't go back to being the guy who quietly smoked cigarettes in the basement of Hollywood clubs like the Cathay de Grande in early '80s, where Morris remembers first meeting him as a "real unassuming guy, who kind of just kept to himself." The smack had given him an aura of invincibility, so without it, he wasn't comfortable being a star. "He was just happy doing what he was doing in those early days," Morris says. "He didn't need all the crap that came with being a megastar."

Between 1988 and 1991, Izzy's relationship with his band slowly turned from hot to cold steel. During the recording of *Use Your Illusion* in 1989, Izzy began to protest the album's high drama by putting himself out of the picture. "Because the album reached such gargantuan proportions as far as the production and complexity and the massive expectations," Slash told *Music Radar* in 2011, "Izzy started to bow out. He was harder to find, because that was against his rock & roll philosophy, which I totally agree with."

In 1991, the same year Nirvana broke punk, all hell broke loose within GNR. They were simultaneously the biggest band in the world and a complete mess. Kim Neely of *Rolling Stone*, who interviewed the band that year, wrote, "It's late July, and as usual, Guns N' Roses are screwing everything up." In May, they fired their longtime manager, Alan Niven, who had guided them to the top when no one else would. In July, during a show in St. Louis, Axl attacked a fan and a riot ensued. Drummer Steven Adler had sued the band, challenging the legitimacy of his firing in 1990. Axl was also chronically late to gigs, for curious reasons; in Tampa, rumor has it, he was backstage watching *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II: The Secret of the Ooze*.

Eventually, Izzy claimed he could no longer deal with the complexities of being in a band with Axl Rose. "I had a bus, they had a plane. And I beat them to the gigs," he told MTV's Kurt Loder in 1992.

On Nov. 7, 1991, it was announced that Izzy had quit the band, which happened just as the GNR train was rolling off the tracks. His last show as an official member of the band took place at Wembley Stadium in London on Aug. 31, where he sang lead vocals on "14 Years," a song he collaborated on with Axl in 1990, combining two tracks they had been working on separately. The lyrics tell the story of a friendship falling apart. It could also be a song about a girl who complains a lot, or a band fighting for respect (a recurring theme in a number GNR songs), but most fans assume it's about Izzy and Axl.



*Unreleased photo of Izzy during a tour of Japan with Guns N' Roses (1988); Credit: Alan Niven*

"It just got to the point that Axl, he was going to run the show," Izzy told the *Lafayette Journal & Courier* in 1993. "He was going to run Guns N' Roses. I just decided I wasn't going to be a part of it."

Ashhurst tells me that in 1992, after quitting GNR, Izzy withdrew all his money from the bank, roughly \$2 million, and stuffed it in the saddlebags of his '88 Harley. Improbable as it may sound, a few days later, Izzy and his money arrived at Ashhurst's condo in West Hollywood. This was the birth of the Ju Ju Hounds. "He still had all the muck on his goggles when he pulled up," Ashhurst says. "Man, he didn't trust anyone at that point."

**Ashhurst is one of several sources** who offer me tips on where to find Izzy. "If you want to find him, go to a local motorcycle repair shop," he tells me. "He works on his own bikes," another says. "He's surfing near Ojai," said former GNR manager Vicky Hamilton. But the truth is, only a handful of musicians have seen Izzy over the years. Ashhurst hasn't seen or heard from Izzy since 1994. Neither has Charlie Quintana, the former drummer of the Ju Ju Hounds, Social Distortion and Bob Dylan. "I respect his privacy," Quintana tells me over a landline in Mexico. Weber, the former Hollywood Rose guitarist, hasn't spoken to Izzy in decades.

Izzy, who no longer makes public appearances, hasn't played in front of a crowd in four years. The last time he played a show that I could find any record of was on Dec. 3, 2012, in Los Angeles, where he was a guest during Aerosmith's Global Warming tour. He wore a three-piece suit that night and played

“Mama Kin,” a song GNR covered in their early days. He wore the same suit for two more gigs, on Nov. 23 and 24 at the Hard Rock Casino in Las Vegas. A former manicurist at the Hard Rock Spa — who claims she slept with Izzy Stradlin in the summer of '88, during a GNR tour with Aerosmith, listening to Cinderella's *Long Cold Winter* on his tour bus — told me she ran into Izzy at the Hard Rock. “He seemed distant and spoke cryptically,” she says. “He wasn't himself, at least not how I remember him.”

On stage that night, Izzy approached the microphone and said something you could only catch if you read lips: “Hi mom.” With his aviators on, he seemed to recoil under the spotlight. Izzy was uncomfortable on the stage, as if he wanted to go back to doing “Indiana stuff,” which is how he described it to TuneCore's Jeff Price in 2006: racing his bike on the tail behind Mary Lou Donuts; grabbing a slice at the Arni's in Market Square; or, as he told his local paper in 1993, planting some acreage.

**It's Sept. 4, 2016, and Axl Rose and Duff McKagan are on Brazilian TV.** It's the first time they've been interviewed together in decades. The fact that Axl ghosted the American press for Brazil only surprises non-GNR fans who are ignorant to the fact the band is the Holy Writ of rock in South America. They're promoting the upcoming South American leg of the Not in This Lifetime tour.

The interviewer asks Axl if there's any chance Izzy will join the band on their seemingly never-ending reunion tour. “I don't even know what to say,” said Axl. “We make arrangements and then he goes and does other things. With Izzy you never know what to expect.”

On Sept. 8, Izzy Stradlin posted a tweet from an unverified profile that's updated just as often as it's edited. “Bullshit. They [Guns N' Roses] didn't want to split the loot equally. Simple as that. Moving right along.” The retired gunslinger, emerging from his hideout to fire a warning shot at his old gang. (He deleted the tweet on Sept. 28.)

Izzy has played other one-off shows with GNR over the years. In 1993, after his replacement, Gilby Clarke, broke his wrist in a motorcycle accident, he played five overseas dates on the *Use Your Illusion* tour. He played 13 shows of a European tour in 2006 (when Axl had his fiberoptic cornrows), and the two Vegas dates in 2012. So why can't he do a one-off for the fans? Why wasn't Izzy at the Troubadour on April 1, when GNR reunited? Is it really just about “splitting the loot”?

To those who know him — or knew him, since they haven't seen him in years — Izzy's rejection of the GNR reunion is a very public way for him to reclaim his legacy, while at the same time, maintaining an unscheduled life. Izzy was once the band's Godfather, and he wants fans to remember him that way, not as the hired hand he became in later years. “Izzy was the mastermind. In the beginning, it was all him,” says Chris Weber. “Axl assumed that role later on.”

When it came to songwriting, the early dynamic was as follows: Izzy would write the basic structure of the song. Axl would add lyrics and vocal melodies (he'd also write on the piano). Duff and Adler added the backbone. Slash, the best musician out of the five, would add the finger-licking guitar parts. Not always in that order, but that's how they did it prior to the fractured recording process of *Use Your Illusion*. The tension between his guitar and Slash's '59 Les Paul replica — Izzy's funky, syncopated jabs, Slash's venomous wrecking machine — is what made *Appetite for Destruction* bleed in so many different directions.

Izzy is now symbolic of the prototype phase of GNR, before their mutation into the biggest band on the planet. He engineered GNR into a rumbling Harley when '80s metal bands were all trying to be air-cooled Kawasaki racers. Not everyone agrees. Axl apologists, especially those who discovered GNR during the MTV world premiere of "November Rain" on June 27, 1992, view GNR's evolution as the ultimate marriage of hard rock and Shakespeare — to them, Izzy's minimalist philosophy held them back.

I tend to see it this way: Axl became the group's auteur, the one who sculpted the band from an ivory figurine into a Michelangelo. But it was Izzy's back-alley hustling that built the foundation of GNR. When Axl was still just Bill, living in Lafayette, Izzy was already the drummer in drag punk bands like Naughty Women. Before GNR played their first show, Izzy had his own micro-economy and Rolodex of seedy contacts. He sold heroin to rockstars, negotiated bookings on local pay phones, hawked leather belt straps for consignment at local record shops like Vinyl Fetish, helped deliver the *L.A. Weekly*, worked as a telemarketer. According ex-Hollywood Rose bassist Steve Darrow, Izzy was even the band's stylist: "He had us meet up at his place, then fix up everybody's hair and makeup before anyone left the room. Axl, too." His entrepreneurial bent was the backbone of GNR. Then Axl turned the small business into a multinational corporation.

Some say Axl's takeover was necessary for the survival of the band. It was. Others think it sold them down the river. Maybe it did.

**The complex dynamic between** the two Midwestern rockers goes back to 1977, on Jane Boswell's art table at Jefferson High School in Lafayette.



*Jeffrey Dean Isbell (left) and William Bruce Bailey (aka Axl Rose), high school sophomores, 1977; Credit: Jefferson High School Yearbook*

It was their sophomore year of high school, and Jeff Isbell and William Bailey (Axl Rose) were drawing in Boswell's "Arts and Crafts Pottery" class. Izzy was the better illustrator and member of the school's Art Club. Axl, the better singer, was in the Boys and Girls Ensemble. The two weren't following the lesson plan that particular day. "Gotcha little bastards!" is what Boswell tells me she wanted to say. Instead, she began to admire their drawing.

"They were combing opposing elements into a beautiful whole," she tells me over the phone. "The whole, it's funny now that I think about it, was a skull-like figure with guns and roses."

Boswell tells me Izzy and Axl were illustrating their feelings; tormented by the a pall hanging over them resulting from childhood trauma. Public court documents indicate that Izzy's parents were divorced in 1973. A Lafayette local who knew the Isbell family tells me that Izzy's mom was extremely bitter about the divorce and felt that Richard Clyde Isbell, the father, had abandoned her and their three sons. Boswell describes Axl's strict Pentecostal upbringing as "difficult." It was later discovered that Axl was sexually abused by his biological father, William Rose, who abandoned the family when Axl was just two.

Following their art class collaboration, the two boys began silkscreening their design onto plain white T-shirts, a logo for some future punk band. "That took courage," says Boswell. During Izzy's senior year, 1979, as he walked down the halls of Jefferson High, Boswell saw him for one last time. "He told me he was going to California to start a rock & roll band."

Looking back at their history, it's clear why Izzy expects equality. On the schoolyard, they were always on the same level. On the Sunset Strip, they both ran the gang that first became the "world's most dangerous band" in the late '80s, then the most self-destructive in 1991. But over the years, Izzy has become the GNR saga's version of Brian Jones, who founded The Rolling Stones but was pushed to the margins by the more charismatic Jagger and Richards, even before his death at the age of 27.

Twenty-seven is also the age at which Kurt Cobain died — and the age at which, on Dec. 15, 1989, Izzy Stradlin became sober, turned off by the call of Dionysius right before the reaper came calling. It was a detour from fate that saved his soul. It happened roughly 30,000 feet above the ground.

**Aug. 27, 1989:** Jeffrey Dean Isbell, 5'11", 27 years old, 150 pounds, was arrested at the Phoenix Sky Harbor airport wearing a black suit with black boots for "interference" on USAir flight 350 from Indianapolis to Los Angeles. Translation: After becoming impatient waiting for the restroom, Izzy Stradlin unzipped his pants and pissed in the galley.

[pullquote-3]"I believe his original flight to L.A. was delayed, so by the time Izzy and his girlfriend were on the flight, they had probably been drinking in the airport for hours," says Scott Rivas, the former FBI agent responsible for transferring Izzy from the Maricopa County Jail into federal custody.

"He was never a jerk like a lot of people in higher positions," Rivas remembers. "In fact, he was quite the opposite. A real nice guy. Oh, he told me he was from Idaho."

It was a cry for help. Pissing in the galley of a passenger plane wasn't the result of a full bladder, so much as an empty gas tank. He had given up; the rock-star lifestyle was ripping him apart.

“Whizzy,” as he was afterward teased by his bandmates, would perform on Oct. 18, 1989, at the L.A. Coliseum. It was the night that Axl, who had keenly studied Jagger’s rule over the Stones, made yet another bold move in his power play. Before playing in front of 72,000 screaming fans, he ranted: “If certain people in this band don’t start getting their shit together, these are going to be the last Guns N’ Roses shows. ... I’m tired of too many people in the organization dancing with Mr. goddamn Brownstone.”



*Izzy drinking tea during a tour of Japan with Guns N' Roses (1988); Credit: Alan Niven*

By December, Izzy was clean. His sobriety had given him the ability to see what he had buried with the dope. It seems he became numb to the GNR fix once he realized it was too stressful for him. “That was my low point. Around ’89, I had bottomed out,” Izzy told TuneCore’s Jeff Price in 2006. That year, he purchased a classic brick, Federal-style home in Lafayette, one of the county’s oldest properties. In 1990, the grandmother that had introduced him to the drums passed away. Izzy was already fixing on rediscovering his roots.

**It’s a few days** before a reunited GNR plays Dodger Stadium, but I’m still in Ojai, sweat trickling down my brow, leaving a note inside Izzy Stradlin’s mailbox. “Dear Izzy, I know you don’t do interviews ...”

On my way up to Izzy’s house, while studying the landscape, it all began to make sense to me. Ojai is hidden between the Topatopa Mountains and the California coast. It’s a quiet mountain town 90 miles north of L.A., where erstwhile rockers go to plant some acreage, eat organic and avoid temptation. “He’s a health freak,” says Rick Richards of the Georgia Satellites, one of the few people, as far as I can tell, who’s kept in touch with Izzy over the years.

At about nine o'clock, the town of Ojai goes to sleep. A few bars stay open, but sundown is the city's unofficial curfew. "Sometimes I get claustrophobic between all the mountains, so I just drive down to the beach," says a local recording engineer from New York. It's where Izzy can enjoy his permanent vacation from the fast lanes of Hollywood, without kissing it goodbye completely.

At first, I think about opening his gate and walking onto his property. I've already picked a few oranges from across the street (Ojai is covered with citrus groves) and think I could offer him a few. Then I remember Jimmy Ashhurst's story of Izzy during the '92 riots.



*Izzy Stradlin (left), Jimmy Ashhurst and Charlie Quintana of the Ju Ju Hounds, in front of a burning tour bus; Credit: Courtesy Alan Niven*

"We were recording the Ju Ju Hounds record in Redondo Beach when the L.A. riots happened," says Ashhurst. "Our sound engineer was like, 'Shots fired!' And Izzy grabbed all the tapes and gear. We went down to a local gun shop, and he just loaded up a duffle bag with guns. After that, we went to his house in Palos Verdes and he had a tripod set up with a machine gun on it and I was like, 'I don't think they're gonna come up this far, bro.'"

I move along and grab a beer at the Deer Lodge in Ojai, where a punk rocker and animal rights activist tells me Izzy records at a studio used by Kenny Loggins — who writes children's songs now. In May, Izzy was seen recording at Ojai's Brotheryn Studios with some of rock's most talented players, including guitarist Rick Richards. Richards is probably best-known for shredding in the back of an empty hay truck in the video for the Georgia Satellites' biggest hit, "Keep Your Hands to Yourself." He was also the lead guitarist of the Ju Ju Hounds. He calls me from Atlanta and updates me on Izzy in his Southern accent.

“Since he didn’t do the GNR project, he just wanted to let his fans know he was still around and playing music,” says Richards. During the Brotheryn sessions, with bassist J.T. Longoria behind the mixing board, and Taz Bentley behind the kit, Izzy recorded tons of raw material. “This could be part of a bigger scheme, but nothing’s written in stone,” says Richards. “You see, he likes to live a stress-free existence.”

Thus far, only two songs have graduated from rough cuts into proper releases, “Walk ‘N Song” and “F.P. Money.” Izzy sings the chorus on “F.P. Money,” which is hard to decipher, but he seems to be singing, “Making fighter pilot money, it’s a bag of gold.” Or something like that. Or it could be, “They can fight about it, money, it’s a bag of gold.”

GNR’s second drummer, Matt Sorum, plays on the track. Sources tell me Sorum was offered a guest spot on the GNR reunion tour, but he could never come to financial terms with his old band. Izzy, as we all know by now, was offered what he felt was an unequal share of GNR equity. “F.P. Money” could be a coded message — or, as Stradlin contended in a deleted tweet from July 6, it could just be influenced by cancelled Jack Black comedy *The Brink*. Your guess is as good as mine.

**I’m back in L.A.**, sitting in a chic cafe in West Hollywood when Jimmy Ashhurst pulls up on an Italian Vespa he bought cash-in-hand at Sturgis one year. GNR is headed to Dodger Stadium. Jimmy’s wearing mirrored aviators that make his graying sideburns, long hair and faded nautical tattoos look prison-made. His face looks like aged leather, seasoned by a career as a sturdy bass player for wild rock bands like Buckcherry.

Ashhurst met Izzy on the Sunset Strip in the early ‘80s. He became his first bandmate in the Ju Ju Hounds, who were signed to Geffen Records and released just one self-titled album in 1992. “I was watching MTV and Kurt Loder came on and said that Izzy had left Guns N’ Roses,” he tells me. “Then the phone rang, and it was him. He was calling from Lafayette to ask me to start a band, and I kid you not, man, I was watching him *on TV*.”

Alan Niven, who was fired by GNR seven months before Izzy quit, was hired as the manager of the Ju Ju Hounds. “From a manager’s point of view, I believed that Izzy could develop a career that would not be dissimilar from that of a Tom Petty,” says Niven. “Where he’d go out and do short tours for about six weeks; not overplay or exhaust. Keeping it homely and down-home. Izzy himself showed concurrence by ignoring an invitation to open for Bon Jovi. ‘I’d rather play clubs than open for him,’ he mumbled dismissively.”

Izzy and Ashhurst would recruit Rick Richards and drummer Charlie Quintana to form one of rock’s biggest could-have-beens. Izzy had dirty dreadlocks and wanted to create a rock band that blended the reggae of Toots & The Maytals with the boozy pub rock of The Faces. Some say this was the happiest he had ever been on stage. The band even had an AOR radio hit, “Shuffle It All.”

Izzy Stradlin’s Ju Ju Hounds could have been his Heartbreakers. Instead, they became his X-Pensive Winos. On July 21, 1993, Geffen released an EP, *Izzy Stradlin and the Ju Ju Hounds Live*. Recorded in Ireland in 1992, it’s the clearest channel to feeling the raw power of the now-forgotten band. The five-track EP was only released in Japan, not uncommon for Izzy, who was keenly aware of the Japanese market’s unhealthy obsession with American hard rock.

“Izzy's a fucking gentleman,” says Quintana. “He took care of us. No ego. He was very private guy, and there were times when he'd be in his hotel room, but we all respected that.”

But the Ju Ju Hounds drowned in Izzy's lack of ambition. He moved to Hawaii and refused to do press, following the surf reports instead of finishing the band's second album. One source says Izzy refused an opportunity to appear on *Saturday Night Live*. Another tells me that Izzy and Ashhurst weren't getting along; that it was their personality conflict that brought down the Ju Ju Hounds. The fact is Izzy was sober, and Ashhurst wasn't.

In 1994, Izzy mysteriously ghosted his bandmates and took a one way trip to Europe. Some say he went to Spain; other say it was to Sweden with his then-girlfriend. The Ju Ju Hounds were recording in Tobago when it happened, an island in the Caribbean. “He just took a turn,” says Quintana. “He didn't say where he was going, but he likes to travel, and I respect that.”

Nobody knows for sure why Izzy disappeared from those recording sessions — including Ashhurst, whose life began to spiral out of control. He felt rudderless without the Ju Ju Hounds. “When the band broke up, I decided to get a heroin addiction, then kick it, just to be able to relate to Izzy better.”

“Izzy has always been the kind of guy with somewhere else he needed to be,” Slash wrote in his memoir.

**I never found Izzy.** My letter was probably trashed with the envelopes from his royalty checks. When I got his number and called him, there was no response. Izzy's mystique lies in his ability to slip away from us — but, paradoxically, he will always be the most relatable member of GNR; the guy Alan Niven once described as the “cool heart for the hot soul of the band.” Maybe it's because Izzy seemed to disappear on stage, behind the shadows of his swinging Les Paul, under his newsboy hat and the forcefield of cool he'd erect with the noirish detachment of a street hustler. Izzy always seemed more working-class in that respect, not just in terms of socioeconomic status, but stage presence.

It's unfair to say this, even a bit unsportsmanlike, but Izzy's the only Gunner whose integrity seems fully intact after two decades of feuding that stained everyone involved. Izzy seemingly never lost his cool. Even his Gary-Oldman-as-Drexl dreadlocks in '92 seemed more low-key, like he was some Rastafarian white-boy busking for change on Telegraph Avenue, whereas Axl's NFL wide-receiver corn rows from the aughts — the one's he premiered at the 2002 MTV VMA's — looked like they were sculpted by engineers at NASA.

Axl, once dubbed the “Howard Hughes of Rock,” is now the genre's most public ambassador. His remarkable comeback (fronting both GNR and AC/DC) has revived hard rock. Like Barry Bonds in 2001, Axl's current run defies critics, science, even logic. The Not in This Lifetime tour, as of this writing, has grossed over \$117 million because Axl has started batting .400 again — nobody can question that. He's even doing press conferences and tweeting out adorable emojis.

Izzy Stradlin, who's tweeting as well, is almost unrecognizable without his darkly-tinted aviators. “Mr. Invisible,” as Axl once called him, now wants to be visible, without being there, or having to deal with all the shit that comes along with being there. The music he quietly releases, with little-to-no promotion, is how he remains relevant without having to remain present. It's why there are still fans with “Where's Izzy” signs, like Caroline Campos, because some of them are genuinely curious about the whereabouts

of GNR's simple man, or feel the band remains incomplete without him. Others just want to show-off their knowledge of GNR trivia.

But for now, Izzy is the face on the side of the milk carton inside Axl's fridge, next to ex-guitarist Buckethead's KFC bucket, right under Adler's decomposed drug habit, hidden behind the bowl of stale spaghetti — the GNR reunion's missing person and its most unanswerable question.