

# Music Played on the Strings of Time

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He arrived, hoping to find a new Lennon, or a Jimi Hendrix. Or an alternate universe where the Beatles had never broken up.

As the air ceased shimmering around him, Jeremy staggered; with his head pounding, he sucked in a deep breath. His employers at Alternitech always made him empty his lungs before stepping through the portal. The company had strict rules limiting the amount of non-returnable mass shuttled across timelines, even down to the air molecules. Take nothing tangible; leave behind as little as possible.

The air here smelled good, though; it tasted the same as in his own universe.

He snatched a glance around himself, making sure that no one had seen him appear. It had rained recently, and the ground was still wet. Everything about this new reality appeared the same, but each timeline had its subtle differences.

Jeremy Cardiff simply needed to find the useful ones.

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The Pacific Bell logo on the phone booth had the familiar design, but with a forest-green background color instead of bright blue. He had always found a phone booth in the same spot, no matter which alternate reality he visited. Some things must be immutable in the Grand Scheme.

Jeremy reached into the pocket of his jacket and withdrew the ring of keys. One of them usually worked on the phone's coin compartment, but he also had a screwdriver and a small pry bar. His girlfriend Holly had never approved of stealing, but Jeremy had no choice—in order to spend money in this universe, he had to get it from somewhere *here*, since he could leave none of his own behind.

The third key worked, and the coin compartment popped open, spilling handfuls of quarters, nickels, and dimes—Mercury dimes, he noticed; apparently they had never gotten around to using the Roosevelt version. He scooped the coins out of the phone booth and sealed them in a pouch he took from his pack. Never get anything mixed up, the cardinal rule.

Time to go searching. Jeremy picked up the phone book dangling from a cable in the booth and flipped through the yellow pages, hunting for the nearest record store.

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Before he had left his own timeline that morning, everything had happened with maddening familiarity:

“Your briefing, Mr. Cardiff,” the woman in her white lab coat had said. The opalescent *Alternitech: Entertainment Division* logo shone garish on her lapel, but she seemed proud of it. Her eyebrows were shaved; her hair close-cropped and perfectly in place; her face never showed any expression. This time Jeremy saw she was attractive; he had not noticed before. Every other time he had been too preoccupied with Holly to notice.

“You tell me the same thing every trip,” Jeremy said to the Alternitech woman, shuffling his feet. He felt the butterflies gnawing at his stomach. He just wanted to get on with it.

“A reminder never hurts,” she said, handing him the high-speed tape dubber. It had eight different settings to accommodate the types of music cassettes most often found in near-adjacent timelines.

At least the woman had stopped giving him the “time is like a rope with many possible strands” part of the speech. Jeremy was allowed only into universes where he himself did not exist at that moment; it had something to do with exclusions and quantum principles. He chose never to stray far from his own portion of the timestream, stepping over to adjacent threads, places where reality had changed in subtle ways that might lead to big payoffs in his own reality.

Other divisions of Alternitech sent people hunting for elusive cures to cancer or AIDS, but they had been by and large unsuccessful. A cure for cancer would change history too much, spin a timeline farther and further away from their own, and thus make it harder to reach.

‘Ghost music,’ on the other hand, was easy to find. Jeremy wanted to find new work by Hendrix or Morrison or Joplin, a timeline where these stars had somehow escaped freak accidents or avoided suicide.

“Do you have everything now?” the woman asked him.

“All set.” Jeremy stuffed the tape dubber in his shoulder pack. “I’ve got my money bag, a snack, some blank tapes, and even a bottle to piss in if I can’t hold it.” Sometimes the precautions seemed ridiculous, but he wasn’t here to question the rules. Alternitech would deduct from his own commission the transport cost for every gram of mass differential.

“You have five hours until you return here,” she said. The portal opened, shimmering inside its chrome framework. “I trust that will be enough time for you to search.”

“I’ve never needed more than two hours, even if I have to walk to the mall.”

She ignored that. He was disrupting her memorized speech. “You are entitled to your commission on whatever new music you locate, but according to our contract we retain all rights and royalties.” She smiled. Her lips looked as if they had leaped off the screen from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

“Of course,” he said. He had already learned that once, with his first big payoff, finding three new albums by Buddy Holly—he had actually been looking because of Holly’s name, and he had been so surprised he had almost forgotten what to do. Almost. He had coasted on the triumph for a year, but he had found nothing new in a long time. He felt the anticipation building each time, wondering what he might find.

Exhaling the air in his lungs, Jeremy went sailing into the timestream.

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Shopping malls had to be the most ubiquitous structures in creation. Jeremy had never encountered a timeline where the mall did not exist.

Inside the record store, Jeremy scouted down the aisles. The new releases displayed the appropriate Big Hits; a familiar Top 40 single played on the store's stereo system. The important changes would be subtler, difficult to find.

He checked under the Beatles first. At other times he had found strange but useless anomalies—a version of *Abbey Road* that did not include “Maxwell's Silver Hammer,” a copy of the White Album that actually listed the songs on the back, a release of *Yesterday and Today* that had retained the disgusting butcher shop cover censored in the U.S. But since he could not take anything physical back with him, cover variations were worthless. In this store, however, everything looked the way it should have.

Disappointed, he next tried Elvis, the Doors, Led Zeppelin, John Lennon—those would net him the most commission if he brought an undiscovered treasure back.

He might as well have stayed home.

With a sigh, he finally searched for Harry Chapin and Jim Croce, Holly's favorites. New songs by these two wouldn't sell well back in his own timeline, but he always checked, for her. He stopped himself—it didn't matter anymore. Who gave a damn for Holly? But he looked anyway.

He thought of Chapin, killed in a car accident ... his Volkswagen smashed under a truck, wasn't it? And Jim Croce, dead in a plane crash at age 30, two weeks after his song “Time in a Bottle” had been a theme in a TV movie: *She Lives*, one of those oh-so-typical “my lover is dying of a terminal disease” films of the early seventies. Jeremy considered the song sappy and sentimental; Holly insisted it wasn't.

“You know, if it were me saving time in a bottle,” he had said to her, “I could think of a lot better things to do with it. Like find more time for my own music.”

He knew just how to push Holly's buttons. After one fight, he had left a box on her doorstep for her to keep “all those wishes and dreams that would never come true.” He had intended it to be ironic; she had called it cruel.

He and Holly had such different needs that they clashed often over the two years they had been together, coming close and drawing apart. He decided it was probably over now for good. Jeremy had his music, his need to write songs and work toward breaking into the business. Holly, though, just wanted to hang out with him, wasting hours in conversation that had no topic and no purpose. She said it brought them together; he resented her for draining away time that he could have used for composing.

In the house he kept his own mixer, a MIDI sequencer, synthesizers, music editing programs, a set of panel speakers mounted on marble blocks and an amp that could lift the house two inches off its foundations if he decided to crank the volume. He had all the gadgetry, he studied the hits, tried to come up with a sure-fire blockbuster.

Listening to the crap on the radio, he couldn't see that his own stuff was any worse.

He just needed a break. You had to know a name, get under the right label, and somebody would *make* your songs hits, crowbar you to the top of the charts. Otherwise, music people tossed unsolicited demo tapes out the window. Reject. Sorry, kid.

But Jeremy planned to get in through the side door, to make a name for himself by bringing 'ghost music' back to his own timeline and taking credit for it. Then the studio execs would be ready to listen to his stuff....

But it wouldn't happen here, not in this timeline, not in this record store. Jeremy sighed. No Beatles, not even any new Chapin. He flicked his gaze down to Croce.

Holly disagreed with Jeremy's approach to songwriting. She worked as a nurse and sometimes treated him like a patient with psychological problems. Therapy. Pop psychology. "You can't just find a formula and imitate it. You need the depth, the emotion. And you can only get that by drawing it from yourself, by being brave enough to look deep. But you're afraid to. You need to have something inside yourself before you can share it with anyone else."

But he knew Holly must be wrong. What did a *nurse* know about music? He played in bars on weekends, drawing a few crowds. Holly herself came to watch, sitting at a table near the stage and mouthing the words to his own lyrics that no one else recognized. Somebody would notice him. One of his songs would catch on. He needed a foot in the door and some more practice.

Startled, he found five different cassettes with Jim Croce's name on the side. In his own timeline, Croce had made only two albums, and most of those cuts had been compiled into varied "Greatest Hits" collections. After a moment of excitement—Jeremy always felt his skin crawl at finding an obvious change—he picked up the cassettes, glancing at the titles, reading the package copy.

In this reality, Croce's plane had never crashed. In the late 70s he had changed his style dramatically, but the cassettes didn't seem to be big successes. Croce had gone for dance music, funky r&b, with more and more desperate attempts at reaching the top 40 again. Songs like "The Return of Leroy Brown" were sure danger signs of waning creativity. On his last album Croce had not even written his own material, instead doing covers of old hits. When Jeremy found "Time in a Bottle: Disco Remix" he couldn't stop from chuckling.

Personal zingers aside, the alternate Jim Croce would have little commercial value for Alternitech back in his own timeline. And Holly would hate him for bringing this stuff back, for spoiling the memories. That would be too petty. He couldn't do that to her.

Not knowing quite why he didn't want to rub her face in it, he decided against the cassettes. Alternitech wouldn't be impressed anyway, and it would be a poor shadow to those new Buddy Holly tapes he had found. Better to leave old Jim dead in his plane crash. Jeremy shook his head, feeling pleased about completing his good deed for the day.

Then he noticed another tape shelved under “Misc. C.” It bore his own name: JEREMY CARDIFF—*This One's for Holly*.

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He paid for the cassette by stacking up the quarters from the phone booth, one dollar at a time. The clerk looked at him strangely for paying in coins, but Jeremy was already tearing the cellophane wrapping from the tape case. The blurb sticker said “Contains the SMASH hit *For Holly* !” Promo material tended to exaggerate the magnitude of any song's success, but he felt enthralled that something of his had actually been called a hit.

By the time he emerged into the scattered crowds wandering the mall walkways, Jeremy had popped the cassette into his player. He sat down in one of the mall lounge areas, closed his eyes next to a trickling fountain, and listened.

Jeremy recognized the first two cuts as variations—sophistications, actually—on songs he had already written. The third cut was one he had just begun in his own timeline. He felt a sense of unreality drifting over him, euphoria at having achieved his dream. In at least one timeline he had succeeded. He wondered what his alternate self was doing now, how he was planning to follow up a successful first album —

Then the other part of it struck him with a force great enough that he sat bolt upright on the padded bench. He shut off the player. He could not enter another timeline where he himself still existed. Exclusion principles. The Jeremy Cardiff in this reality—the one who had been a hit musician—must be dead!

He checked the copyright date on the cassette liner. Last year. His counterpart must have died not long ago.

Jeremy had never dared to check before, had never been interested to find out what altered circumstances had erased his own existence in these other timelines. But here he had achieved his best goals, his dreams—what had happened to him? Another pointless plane crash like Jim Croce's?

Jeremy checked the timer that would send him back through the portal to Alternitech. He had three hours to find out.

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“But can you tell me how he died?” Jeremy tried to keep his voice calm on the telephone. The record company receptionist had kept him on hold long enough that he had already needed to plunk four more quarters into the pay slot.

“Self inflicted,” she said. Record company receptionists must go to school to learn that perfect ‘go screw yourself’ attitude, he thought. “You know, the old couldn't-handle-success story.”

Jeremy's heart caught in his throat. *Self inflicted?* “Don't you have any other information? Please, this is important.”

“Look,” she answered, clearly impatient now, “he took sleeping pills, or shot himself in the head. I can't remember. Jeremy Cardiff had one hit, he made a little money, now he's dead. So what? The price of gas hasn't changed.”

Jeremy swallowed as he hung up on her. “No, I don't suppose it has.”

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While waiting for a bus, Jeremy used the high-speed tape dubber to copy *This One's for Holly* onto a blank cassette from his own timeline, one he could take back with him. He would have to discard the original before he returned through the portal. The sky overhead was gray, as if preparing to rain again.

He listened to the rest of the tape after he had found a seat on the bus and sat back. He munched on a granola bar from his pack, careful to stow the empty wrapper back in the zipper compartment.

As the songs played, the initial astonishment wore off, and he began to hear his music with a fresh ear, like a listener would. Sadly enough, he was forced to admit that the songs seemed rather empty, the “oooh, baby, baby, yeah!” kind he had always scorned. Had he been too close to them? How could he have missed it? None of them had any punch.

Until the last song, “For Holly,” which stood head and shoulders above the rest of the cuts. This had been the reason for the album. This had been the demo somebody had noticed.

He couldn't put his finger on the difference here—the music, the quality of his singing voice, the words? The pain sounded real. Somehow, it combined into a punch of emotion the others had lacked. He rewound the tape and listened to the song again.

When the bus stopped, he got out. The library was three blocks away.

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He flipped through eighteen back issues of *Rolling Stone* until he found his own obituary. It occupied a quarter of a page, showing the cover of his album and his photograph. Jeremy felt an eerie chill seeing his own face stare at him from a photo he did not remember ever having taken.

The uncredited obituary stated the facts and little else. It carried the distinct flavor of an “also ran” notice. Jeremy Cardiff had had one hit, reaching #23 on the charts. He had been unhappy with his modest success, ended up washing down a bottle of sleeping pills with a pint of Jack Daniels. He would be sorely missed, but by whom it did not say.

“That's it?” He blinked up from the pages of the magazine, looking at the other people around in the library. No one noticed him, no one knew who he was. “That's all?”



He left his original cassette on the table in the library, hoping that someone would pick it up and listen to it.

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During their last fight, Holly had said, “I hope you do become famous. I really do. Because I love you.” Her voice was low with an undertone of exhausted anger, as it always was after the shouting stopped and they had both gone to their separate corners. “But you won't make room in your life for anything else. It doesn't have to be that way.”

She tugged her blond hair behind her ears, keeping it out of the way. Faint mascara tracks marked her tears. Few people even recognized that Holly wore makeup, but Jeremy knew she spent half an hour each morning carefully constructing that impression.

“You'll never understand it,” Jeremy said. He had tried to explain it over and over to her, but still she refused to give him the space, to let him have the time and energy he needed to devote to creating music. Instead, she was like a sponge, demanding his devotion, wrestling his attention to her own personal needs instead of to his composing.

“This isn't just a job like being an auto mechanic —” *or a nurse*, he did not add, “I really have the power to move people. I can send out a message that could make everyone think. But I have to take time to get it just right. I can't just drop what I'm working on whenever you're feeling insecure.” The anger crept into his voice once more.

But Holly was having none of it. Quietly, she picked up her purse and went to the door. “Take all the time you need. Follow your yellow-brick road. I don't want to be the one responsible for you not achieving your dream.”

He couldn't think of anything to say in response before she closed the door behind herself. He stood alone in his studio with the tall speakers, the amp, the MIDI equipment, and all his unfinished music. The house was very quiet.

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He listened to his copy of the tape as he made his way back to where the return portal would open for him. He treasured the song “For Holly.” *Would I want to go through time with you? Are you the one?*

What if he had given up everything with Holly for a chance that was ultimately a flop? What if practice and brute strength and determination were not enough? That was the way to *manufacture* songs, like the empty derivative stuff on the rest of his album. Listeners could see right through that facade. He could never send a message to the world if he had nothing to say.

As he walked along the road, Jeremy removed the last quarters from his money pouch. Since he couldn't take them with him, he tossed them in one big handful into a puddle in the gutter. Like a wishing well—but he no longer had any idea what to wish

for.

He needed the substance inside himself before he could put it into the songs, but he had tried to bypass that part, to skip an important step. Sorry, no shortcuts allowed. With a sinking feeling he knew it would be a hell of a lot more difficult.

As he stood in position and waited, Jeremy listened to the last song on the tape one more time. He had managed the true inspiration once, and he could do it again. He could use "For Holly" as a model—and it would be a great gift for her. He must swallow his pride, tell her he had been stubborn.

His chronometer showed only a minute or so before he would return to Alternitech. The executives would be upset when he returned empty-handed again. But Jeremy felt anxious now, ready to start a new timeline of his own. He could get some studio to listen to "For Holly"; he could scrap the empty songs he was working on and spend the time he needed. Maybe Holly would even want to help him; he had never let her actually help him before.

Jeremy froze with his hand on the cassette player. He was not, after all, returning empty-handed. He had his own music—and the contract stated that any songs he found in alternate realities belonged to Alternitech/Entertainment. Everything. The whole copyright, hook, line, and sinker. He had signed it, knowing full well what it contained. If he tried to cross them, they would press the legal buttons and swallow him up.

He could not let that happen to a song like this. He had only one choice, but there was no use crying about it—Alternitech would deduct for the mass differential of a fallen teardrop left behind. He felt his throat trembling as he pushed the button.

The cassette made a thin whimper as it zipped through the high-speed dubber, sending his music back into nothingness, erasing it forever.

Even if he could remember the tune, the words, he could not copy the emotion that had made the song so powerful. Such things could not be imitated; they had to be felt. He didn't want to end up with a minor hit he could not repeat. He had to learn how to *do* it, not how to copy it.

The air shimmered in front of him, opening into a brief doorway back home. His chest felt like lead, but he exhaled, pushing the foreign air out of his lungs. Shifting his pack on his shoulder, he stepped into the portal.

Reality changed subtly around him. It was all right, though. He had new inspiration, new work to do. He opened his eyes in his own timeline.

It might not be the same cut he had heard on his own tape, but it would be different from his other attempts. His focus would be different. He had a song to write, for Holly.