

University of Death

By Sean McManus



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Welcome

Thank you for downloading these two sample chapters of my novel 'University of Death'.

The book is a satire on the music industry and centres on those who invest their dreams in the major label Bigg Records. Jonathan, who you'll meet in a minute, took ten years to create the perfect song, and only Clive Bigg and his label can bring it to the masses. But Bigg didn't get where he is today by inviting anyone to chip in with ideas. Simon and Fred are desperate for someone – *anyone* – to listen to their blend of glam and rock called 'heavy tinsel', but as Bigg gobbles up the industry, their options are becoming more limited. And how will Dove from University of Death cope at Bigg Records now that Bigg has acquired the indie label he signed to?

I hope that you enjoy this taster and are tempted to buy the book. This book is self-published. Because there is no marketing budget, every sale, review, blog mention and link makes a massive difference. Thank you for your support.

- Sean McManus

Useful links

- [Buy the book at Lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com)
- [University of Death website at www.sean.co.uk](http://www.sean.co.uk)

Chapter 1

This is where music goes to die: a mausoleum for dead pop stars, exhausted record labels and defunct bands; a creative wasteland where the past is endlessly repackaged and new bands are formed for the benefit of focus groups; a dumping ground for inventive music that will never see the light of day.

The Bigg Records building looked like it was made from reclaimed gravestones. Two girls in school uniform were carving the name of a boy band into the stone with a key, as thousands had done before them. A third girl stood lookout and chewed, staring straight through Jonathan as he came around the corner. She blew a pink bubble and made it burst as he was level with her. It echoed in the alleyway and scared three pigeons into flight.

It had taken Jonathan ten years to create the perfect song. His iPod purred in his hand as he set it playing. The essence of all the music he ever loved had been distilled into three minutes. Even now it made the hairs on the back of his neck go electric. Hearing it again spurred him on: he had to get inside Bigg Records.

There were no windows below the third floor, and the only door he could get to was the main entrance. A neon 'welcome' sign hung over it but its gentle glow did nothing to change the building's funereal appearance. It was like a smiley face painted on a tank: it said 'have a nice day', but only as it crushed the life from you.

Was he really welcome here? Bigg's people's people hadn't even returned his calls. Funny way to treat your saviour, he thought. With companies like this, he had decided, you just had to blag your way in

and then convince them afterwards that you were justified. It's easier to seek forgiveness than permission. He looked up at the building towering over him and the skies seemed to darken. Gargoyles leered at him from the roof.

Jonathan took off his iPod and pulled a cigarette from the box in his inside pocket. There was another smoker loitering outside the entrance. His eyes were heavy with make-up and his spots were covered with a pink paste. Jonathan had seen his face somewhere before but couldn't place it. It felt like a logo you see on a lift each day that buries itself deep in your head despite you never consciously noticing it. Clipped to his trousers was a security pass.

"Got a light?" said Jonathan. The man silently extended his lighter and lit Jonathan's cigarette. "Thanks. Don't I know you?"

"Maybe," said the man. He grinned like he'd had a coat hanger fitted as a brace. "I'm J-Rok. From Icicle Star."

"Of course," said Jonathan, quite certain he had never heard of him. "You did that song! How does it go..?"

J-Rok traced a rainbow with his hands as he belted it out. "I've been away away away, but now I'm here to stay-ay-ay." The coven of schoolgirls pointed at him and cackled.

Jonathan was at first startled and then embarrassed at J-Rok's outburst, especially as his voice was too short to reach the high notes without standing on tippy toes. Jonathan didn't know if he was expected to clap, join in or throw a quid at J-Rok's feet. "You're good," he lied. "I saw you do that on some TV thing, I think."

"Yeah, I sang better on the Saturday Show. The units went through the roof after that. We've been filming an insert for kids TV today. It'll go on the website when we know the TX date. Check it out."

"I certainly will." Jonathan cocked his head at the Bigg Records building. "So what's the studio like then?"

"Co-ol, you know," said J-Rok, looking up. "It's like a computer factory or something. Cleaner than a hospital. Yeah, not hard, I know. But with all those gadgets and stuff, they've got to look after them. Make sure the songs are perfect."

Jonathan eyed J-Rok's day visitor pass, which was clamped tight to his trouser pocket with a metal clip. Jonathan couldn't take it without arousing suspicion or possibly being arrested for indecent assault. "I

bet they keep security tight too, with all that kit and superstars like you all over the place.”

“Not really,” said J-Rok, matter-of-factly. “Once you’re past reception, it’s a pretty relaxed culture. Beanbags, lava lamps, you know. You’ve just got to chill if you’re gonna be creative.”

“Well, I’d better let you get on,” said Jonathan, dropping his cigarette and stamping it out. “It’s been a real pleasure.” He extended his hand and J-Rok shook his fingers.

Jonathan turned to leave and then spun back on himself. “Wait a minute!” he said. “This is kind of embarrassing, but could I have your autograph? I just know you’re going to be big. It would be cool to show people I was into your stuff at the start.” Men in their thirties don’t normally autograph-hunt boy bands, but Jonathan knew J-Rok’s conceit would see him through.

“Sure,” beamed J-Rok. “Got some paper?”

Jonathan handed him a train ticket out of his pocket and a biro. J-Rok shook the pen and etched swirls in the cardboard with it in an effort to get it to work.

“I’ve only got one other autograph,” said Jonathan, while J-Rok warmed the pen nib in his mouth. “Prince. He signed a napkin. He just wrote ‘P’ on it but everyone thinks I did it. I hope my friends believe this is really your autograph.”

“I’m sure they will,” said J-Rok. “This is still a pretty rare autograph, you know.”

Probably your first request, thought Jonathan. “Hey!” he said. “I’ve had an idea. That’s got your name on it. Do you still need it?” He pointed to J-Rok’s visitor pass.

J-Rok took it off. “I’m outta here. They want it back though.”

“They must have hundreds,” said Jonathan. “I’m sure they don’t really need it.”

J-Rok turned it over and tried to write on the back of the pass, but the biro just slipped across its plastic surface. “Do you really want this security pass?”

“Well, yeah,” said Jonathan. “As a souvenir of meeting you.” Was he detecting a note of suspicion in J-Rok’s voice?

“You’d better wait here a minute.” J-Rok disappeared through the revolving door and marched up to reception. Jonathan panicked. Had

he been rumbled? Was J-Rok reporting him? Jonathan was probably on camera. His heart jolted as J-Rok pointed at him and the receptionist looked him up and down.

Then J-Rok left the desk and came back outside. "Got one!" he said, holding up a marker. "Linda's always good for a pen. It isn't permanent ink, though."

"I'll put Sellotape on it later."

J-Rok finished writing his name, blew on the ink and then handed his security pass to Jonathan. As Jonathan was about to take it, J-Rok jerked his hand away again. "Don't tell anyone," he said. "Security would go berserk. If I see it on eBay, I will hunt you down."

"No worries," said Jonathan, laughing gently. He imagined J-Rok confronting him to tell him how disappointed he was in him. J-Rok wasn't so much the type to throw a TV out of a hotel window, as the type to throw the remote control on the bed once he'd found a cosy drama he could watch while sheltering from the strange, unfamiliar world outside. If J-Rok had any guts, he'd be smoking inside his record company building, instead of skulking around the streets in make-up. Real music was made by mavericks but Bigg Records could take the most unpromising material and turn it into fool's gold.

J-Rok gently lowered his arm. Jonathan took the pass and squeezed his fingertips against the cold plastic. He almost felt ashamed. It was like taking candy from a baby.

"Thanks," he said, reading the name on the sticker. "It'll be safe with me, Jervais."

Chapter 2

A white bird flew into the Routemaster's cab and perched on the steering wheel. The bus pulsed to the drumbeat as the band jammed on the top deck.

Simon stood, barefoot, on the zebra crossing. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the catalogue number carved into the road, alongside the stripes. The bus thundered towards him. It was so close that Simon could feel the heat of its engine and it wasn't going to stop. He crouched and sprang onto the Belisha beacon, and the bus faded into a red mist beneath him.

From here, Simon could see the roofs of St Johns Wood were painted with lyrics. Only the first lines and rhymes were bold. His eyes swam when he tried to read the rest.

Hooded figures poured from Abbey Road Studios and floated down the pavement. Some carried instruments or albums, taunting him with clues. As they came near, Simon could see the hoods were empty.

A man in a smock, juggling sheep, popped up from behind a patch of shrubbery, like toast from a toaster.

"Wake up, Si," she said. "It's Shepherd's Bush."

"Huh?" said Simon. He opened his eyes to see a tube logo whizz past as the train accelerated out of the station.

"We're nearly there," said Fred, sat beside him. It sounded like she was yawning, but when Simon looked, he could see she was applying lipstick, looking in a tiny mirror balanced on her knees. She smacked her lips and clicked the lipstick shut.

Simon panicked when he realised he didn't know where his guitar was, but then saw the case propped against the other side of the glass, just inside the train door. He rubbed his eyes.

"Tired?" Fred was plucking at her hair. It was short and teased into spikes, making her head look like a sloppily iced cake.

"I dream of a good night's sleep," said Simon. Twigs of blood were lodged in the corners of his eyes. "I swear I snore University of Death sleeve notes."

"You should be ready for anything they throw at you then."

He wasn't. He knew it. He'd spent all week with his scrapbook and CD collection. He'd even skimmed the hagiography again, a cheap rush-job from when anything with the band's logo on it sold. But now his brain had casseroleed the names, dates and lyrics, leaving a mulch of disconnected ideas. "Have you seen this show before?"

"It's new," said Fred. "For some digital channel. UK Puppet Gameshows, or something."

The train slowed to a crawl. "Fred?" Simon spoke tentatively.

"Uh-huh?"

"You will take this seriously, won't you?"

"Course," said Fred. She angled her make-up mirror to check how her breasts looked in her black silk shirt. With a satisfied smile, she snapped the mirror shut and slipped it into the pocket of the brown leather jacket that dwarfed her. It had RAF wings stitched to the front.

"Only, well, you know."

"Chill out, Si," said Fred. "I've got general knowledge licked. You're the biggest University of Death nerd. The questions are a mere formality. This is our fifteen minutes of fame. Enjoy it."

The train drew into a station. "White City," announced the driver. "Alight here for the BBC."

"This is us," said Fred. She collected her flightcased keyboard from the seat opposite.

Simon shivered with nerves. "Break a leg," he said.

* * *

Simon flinched and the make-up woman recoiled. "Watch it!" she said. "I could have yer eye out with this."

He forced his eyelids wide open and didn't dare blink. The woman spoke into a walkie-talkie as she stroked his eyelashes with mascara: "Not much to go on. We could spray glitter in his hair, I s'pose. He looks like a newsreader on a camping holiday."

Simon's t-shirt was covered with swirls and eddies of colour: mostly blue and yellow, but with splashes of brown. A belt with a skull-shaped buckle held up his Asda jeans, which had started life black, but now had round stains all over them. It looked like his trousers had been used as a coffee table.

The make-up woman clipped her radio to her belt. She covered Simon's eyes with one hand and sprayed his hair with the other. After she had lifted the excess glitter and dandruff from Simon's shoulders with a sticky roller, she took her clear plastic satchel of chemicals to the next podium.

Simon was roasting. Each light was like an open oven pointed at him, and he'd been waiting for twenty minutes. He untucked his t-shirt from his trousers and flapped it. The counter they made him stand behind was made of cardboard, part-covered in sparkly paper. He wanted to break a bit off to use as a fan, but there were too many people flying around.

Simon sized up the competition: two strutting pretty boys, barely out of school, too young to have suffered for their art. What did they know? Thirty thousand screws hand-sorted into bags of fifteen was a four track recorder. Eight thousand envelopes stuffed with catalogues and carefully sealed was a half-decent guitar. Seven hours with glassy eyes, hands on autopilot, imagination flying free: that was a new lyric, or perhaps even a melody. About thirty jobs in fifteen years had given Simon a bulging songbook.

He always knew their break would come. Tonight, it had. He and Fred were going to play their greatest hits-to-be on the BBC. On the other side of the studio, he could see the stage waiting for them in near-darkness. Their instruments were plugged in and ready. So were the other band's.

All Simon and Fred had to do was answer a few questions – or to be exact, a few more questions than the other team – and they would be on.

Easy.

Hopefully.

Simon watched absent-mindedly as a woman was zipped into the weasel costume, until the wardrobe girl gave him a filthy look. That shamed him into turning away. The woman was only in her underwear, but it was more embarrassing to face the pitiful audience. Two rows. About twenty people, most of them probably staff. They sipped warm wine from polystyrene cups, out of boredom more than pleasure.

The lights clicked and dimmed. It felt like a fire going out.

One of the runners walked Fred to the centre circle and stood her on a yellow cross taped to the floor. Fred looked briefly over her shoulder to wink at Simon.

A man in headphones counted them down: "In seven, and six, and five, and four..."

Disco lights sprinkled the room with coloured flashes. Someone in the shadows behind the camera clapped with his arms in the air. The audience joined in, beating their hands quickly to make it sound like there were more of them.

The man in headphones held up three fingers and folded them down in turn. When he reached zero, he punched the air and cheesy synth horns heralded the arrival of the six-foot weasel. It lolloped onto the stage, stood behind the quizmaster's desk and waved at the cameras.

"Welcome to Pop Goes The Weasel," said voiceover man with a tone of plastic excitement. "Where a talent for pop and rock is *weasily* recognised!" He was throwing his best TV voice into it, but it couldn't levitate the script above the standard of kids' TV. "Willy the Weasel is ready. The audience is ready. Now let's meet our first team tonight."

A videographer with a rubber chicken dangling from his camera charged up to Fred. She came face to face with her reflection in the glass lens. Fred waved, just as she'd been taught. "Fred is Swedish but lives in London," said the announcer. "Her favourite band is Abba."

The cameraman charged at Simon, who took half a step back. "Her band mate is Simon, whose stage name is *The Thing*," said voiceover man. Simon smiled weakly. "His specialist round will be his favourite band, University of Death. Together, Fred and Simon are called

Goblin. With a little *elf-confidence*, they might just win tonight. Remember: they're playing for their own gig on the BBC at the end of this show. Now, let's welcome our quizmaster... Willy... *the...* WEASEL!"

The weasel waved at the camera with both hands and wobbled its head from side to side. Its face couldn't move, so body language was everything. "Fred, you're first. I have to say, that's an unusual name for a lady." Willy had to say it because it was on the autocue, not because it had just occurred to him, as his stilted delivery made clear.

"It's Swedish for peace," Fred said. "Mum's a bit of a hippy."

"That's lovely." Willy wasn't listening and would have said the same if Fred's name had been Vomit. "You've got one minute to answer five general knowledge questions about music. One wrong answer and you're out of the game. Got that?"

Fred nodded. Spotlights helter-skeltered around her and converged at her feet.

The weasel held the question cards up to its neck, where there was a gauze through which the woman inside was looking out. She took an audible breath and then began: "Start the clock. If I wanted to kill Sinatra using a Taser, which experimental American composer might I employ?"

Simon was taken aback. This was way more cryptic than he expected.

"Frank Zappa," said Fred. Nice one.

"How many arms has a Def Leppard got?"

"Nine," said Fred. It sounded like a guess. Simon crossed his fingers. The only thing he knew about the band is that the drummer had one arm.

There was a long pause before Willy conceded. "Correct. Which of these royals has not had a UK number one single? King, Queen or Prince?"

"Say again?" said Fred.

"Remember, time's running out."

Simon could see the floor manager holding up a kitchen clock. The red hand had got to six. Simon watched Fred's puzzled expression on one of the monitors and willed her to work it out.

"Which of these royals has not had a UK number one single?"

repeated the weasel. "King, Queen or Prince?"

"King?"

"Correct," said Willy. "Last question. You've got 20 seconds to answer but you must get this right. What is the name of John Lennon's first wife?"

Simon stifled his laugh. He had been afraid they'd throw a real humdinger in at the end. If he and Fred failed this round, all their cramming and rehearsal would have been wasted. And they wouldn't even have got to play a song. But this was just too easy. Everyone knew this. What's more, he'd read Cynthia Lennon's book, and bored Fred recounting endless detail. She'd be grateful now. As long as she paid attention and didn't answer 'Yoko', they were through to round two.

Fred stopped herself blurting it out and put a finger to her mouth. For a moment she was lost in thought. A smile flickered across her face, then hid again. Then she answered, with absolute authority. "Imogen."

A gasp came through the speakers and the same synth horns that had cheerily opened the show parped a funeral march. Simon swore to himself. The producer glared at him.

Willy shook his head. "I'm sorry. It's Cynthia," he said.

"The fuck it is!" said Fred. "You're joking, yeah?"

There was another gasp in the studio, but this time it was real.

"Language. Can we do that again please?" called the director from the back of the room. "Keep rolling."

"It's Cynthia," repeated Willy.

"It's fucking Imogen," said Fred. "I can't believe this. This is such a bloody fix."

Willy looked for support around the studio and then settled his gaze on Fred.

"What do you think you're staring at?" she said. "I'll deck you in a minute! You wanna spend more time on research and less time... up a rodent's arse!"

Willy shrugged.

"Don't shrug at me!" screamed Fred. She charged at the weasel and pushed it over on to its back. It rolled from side to side and fought to get upright. Fred jumped astride it and punched its soft

head over and over again. She smashed one of the ping-pong-ball eyes off its face and it bounced away, making a pock sound each time it hit the floor. The woman inside shouted, but her microphone had fallen off and her voice was muffled by the costume. Willy's legs kicked about helplessly, as Fred repeatedly punched his head.

Simon put a hand on his counter and jumped into the air to vault it, but it crumpled under his weight. He yelled in pain as he landed on his outstretched wrist. The cardboard podium folded on top of him. He rolled out of it and stumbled over to Fred, dragging a strip of glittery paper that had glued itself to his shoe. As Simon approached the pair of them wrestling on the floor, the weasel hit his legs. It felt like being smeared with a teddy bear.

Fred was still punching Willy, knocking his head first to one side and then to the other, alternating her left and right hook. As she lifted her right arm into the air, Simon grabbed it to stop her. Fred tore her arm from Simon's grip but she didn't punch again, so Simon backed off.

Fred collapsed onto the weasel like it was a bed, exhausted. Willy rolled uneasily but couldn't right himself or roll her off.

When her breathing had returned to normal, Fred stood up, smoothed her clothes and walked off the set.

"Cheating bastards!" she shouted. "Her name is Imogen!"

* * *

Simon didn't say anything to Fred but kept swearing to himself. He had assumed they would be sent home or arrested, but the TV studio wanted to record the contestant debriefing before doing anything else. The show must go on. Fred was sitting in one of the interviewee chairs, biting her nails.

Her top two buttons were missing. The shirt gaped open, flashing cleavage. The buttons must have come off in the fight, although Simon didn't notice them until Fred came back from wardrobe.

A woman hobbled in, her hair in a net and a clipboard in her hand. She plumped herself down in the chair opposite Fred, rolled up the leg of her jogging trousers and rubbed her calf. "Calmed down now?"

"Yes," said Fred. Sweat was still dripping from her hair.

"Don't mention it," said the woman.

"Sorry?" said Fred.

"Yes, that. Don't mention it. I'm not *that* bruised, anyway." She prodded her tender knee and sucked at the air in pain.

"Oh my God! I didn't realise it was you," said Fred. "I just so bought in to the weasel thing I forgot it was a real person inside."

The woman's lip quivered. "You are sweetie!" she said, her eyes going watery. "It's nice to get some credit for a change! I know it's a crap role, but I've always put my all into it. I do everything for that rodent. Without me, the director can't even get his stupid Willy to stand up. Oh, gosh, I mean..."

"Sokay," said Fred. "We know."

The woman rolled her trouser leg down again and invited Simon to sit in the other chair beside Fred. He flopped himself down with such force that the chair legs squeaked across the floor. The cameraman nodded to confirm they were filming.

"How do you feel?" asked the naked weasel.

"Gutted," replied Fred. "Totally gutted. We had a great set worked out. All original stuff, too. Now we'll never get to play it."

"How did you get that Lennon question wrong?"

"I was so sure," said Fred.

Simon exploded: "How can you be so sure about something so obviously wrong?"

"All right!" Fred shouted at him. "Don't go on about it!" She turned back to the camera. "I remember the day Lennon was... the day he died." Fred rubbed one of her eyes. "Mum was crying. She started singing one of his songs. It was the first time I'd heard it. To me, it always sounds funny to hear it without a Swedish accent now. It was so simple, so beautiful. Mum said he had written it for his wife."

"Which song was that?" asked the interviewer.

Fred sniffed and began to sing softly. "Imogen, there's no heaven," she sang. "Imogen, there's no hell."

Simon stared at Fred aghast and the interviewer laughed.

"What?" said Fred. "What's funny?"

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