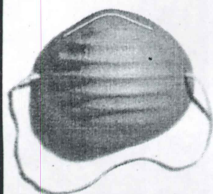


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SO YOU WANNA BE A ROCK & ROLL STAR

How I Machine-Gunned a Roomful of Record Executives and Other True Tales From a Drummer's Life. By Jacob Slichter. Illustrated. 286 pp. Broadway Books. \$21.95.

By James McMurtry

At the junction of commerce and art, no one is ever big enough. Even the biggest could be bigger, especially if they aren't as big as they used to be. Expectation always exceeds reality. Success is relative to expectation. And so our hero, Jacob Slichter, drummer for the Minneapolis power-pop band Semisonic, finds himself deeply saddened when presented with a platinum record, signifying sales of over a million copies of Semisonic's second album, "Feeling Strangely Fine" (1998). Slichter is saddened because he knows the CD — despite the breakout hit "Closing Time" — will never go multi-platinum. His sadness is not a twisted form of egomania; he has practical reasons for it. Success in the music business is relative not only to your own expectations but also to those of your record label — and Semisonic's label, MCA, had expected multi-platinum sales. Also, after recording and promoting two albums, Semisonic had accumulated millions of dollars of debt, an amount from which mere platinum sales couldn't begin to extricate the group.

Slichter's book, "So You Wanna Be a Rock & Roll Star," is an unusual rock memoir. Semisonic is an unusual band: a trio made up of two Harvard graduates — Slichter and the lead singer, guitarist and songwriter Dan Wilson — and a college dropout, the bassist John Munson. Before leaving college, Munson learned enough Mandarin to be able to converse with two Chinese journalists backstage at the Grammy Awards, a feat probably never duplicated at that gathering. Slichter tells no tales of group sex, cocaine or TV's tossed off balconies into swimming pools. The only trashed hotel room he mentions was trashed by another MCA band during a music industry schmoozefest, and Slichter's attitude about it is one of annoyance, because it nearly resulted in all the MCA bands, including Semisonic, being evicted from the hotel. If the members of Semisonic indulged in any stereotypical-rock-star debauchery, Slichter ignores it, focusing instead on the sometimes exciting but often banal and soul-sully work of becoming a rock star.

"At 32, I imagined I was the oldest tenderfoot in the history of rock 'n' roll," Slichter is the rookie in the band, the other two members having been in another popular Minneapolis band, Trip Shakespeare. Initially, he is scared and alienated by the road. At the group's first McDonald's stop on its first tour, Slichter is surprised to find his bandmates and their sound man sitting

at three separate tables eating in silence. He later asks Dan:

"Dan, do you find the road to be an emotionally cold place?"

"Yes."

"What do you do about that?"

"Without lifting his eyes from the page, he spoke. 'Eventually, you'll grow to enjoy that coldness and learn to crave it.'"

Slichter is prone to panic attacks before shows, often consuming as much as half a pack of Roloids in preparation. He worries that he'll blow the band's big chance by vomiting or passing out onstage. He survives the Midwestern club tour that lands the band its first record deal; he survives the first major-label recording sessions, certain that the big-time producer



will fire him at any moment; and the band survives two corporate shake-ups at two different labels before the release of its first album. Semisonic goes on to survive the lackluster sales of its first CD. In the process, Slichter gains confidence.

(One of Slichter's more impressive attributes, in the context of his being a rock drummer, is his business savvy.) Not many newly signed musicians seem to remember that, from their artist royalties, they are going to have to pay back every penny the label is spending on them, right down to the lunch tabs ostensibly picked up by the local reps.

"I always thanked the locals for lunch, and then one day it occurred to me....

"Dwayne, that's a corporate Amex, right?"

"Yeah."

"And you write 'Semisonic' on the credit card slip, and that gets billed to our recoupable account, right?"

"Yeah."

"So really, shouldn't you be thanking us for lunch?"

"The debt haunts Slichter along with his

gradually diminishing fears of melting down onstage. Before being signed, he had endured years of dead-end day jobs. Perhaps this fact kept him attuned to the financial realities that are lost on younger rockers (who think they've made it once they've been signed.)

Apparently, Semisonic never recouped its debt, but the band did "make it" in most senses of the term. "Closing Time" became a huge hit. The group toured the United States, Canada, Mexico and Europe, and even made some money off songwriting royalties, which the band members shared equally. (Unlike artist royalties, songwriting royalties go directly to the writers unless the contract says otherwise.) Slichter could pay for a newer used car and take a second apartment, in Brooklyn. But then the band was dropped by MCA after its third album sold poorly. The label itself soon collapsed, succumbing to the pressures brought on by the Internet and "growing listener alienation."

Slichter's most impressive attribute is his unfailing enthusiasm for his craft and for music in general. After eight years of battling stage fright, drinking bad coffee while stroking the egos of reticent radio station program directors, making expensive videos that were rejected by MTV, basically jumping through flaming hoops to get noticed, and finally being dropped, Slichter remains what you might least expect such a rock veteran to be: a fan. With Semisonic on hiatus, he looks forward to the release of Dan Wilson's solo album, and enjoys being in a crowded bar listening to John Munson's new band. In one passage near the end of the book, Slichter expresses a desire I've never heard voiced.

"Whenever I go out to hear music, I long to be onstage, to be the one lifting all of the fans into their euphoric orbit. The strange thing is that sometimes, when I'm rocking onstage and see the staring eyes and swaying hips and hear the singing and cheering voices, I imagine being in the crowd. When we played in Mexico City and hundreds of lighters began to flick in time with the music, I was jealous of the crowd for the style with which it made the night so fun. I wanted to be the drummer and one of those people amplifying the drumbeat with their lighters."

The fact that the memoir ends shortly before Sept. 11, 2001, gives it the innocent quality of a letter from that other world, the one we remember. In the old world, record executives used to brag that their industry was recession-proof, and maybe it was, but they never foresaw the combined effects of recession, listener alienation and file sharing. Nightclubs, which support touring acts, used to do well in a bad economy, but now people have been too broke for too long and even the bars are suffering. Credit cards are maxed out if not revoked and, for many, there's not even money left to buy a drink, much less pay a cover charge. This summer, fuel prices will severely affect the revenues of any band that dares to tour, especially those at the Econoline van and Motel 6 level. I would like to know how Jacob Slichter and his friends survived the transition. I hope they are still making music here in the new world. □