

16 *One Giant Leap*

Steve cleverly left the American option wide open, and he had a deal on the table. He was already managing Monie Love, who had moved to the States, along with the Jungle Brothers and the rapper Ice-T. So, he knew the moves we had to make. It's a leap of faith, but if we don't have a go we would never know.

America was calling!

We had already gone a bit rock'n'roll by shooting the video for 'Tender Love' in New Jersey, but Steve's seduction of Giant Records meant that trips to the States were now becoming a regular thing.

I wandered round Times Square thinking, 'This is cool.' It's just like I had seen it in the movies. I loved New York! It was like London on steroids.

Steve gave me strict instructions on how to behave there.

'Talk to no one, do not make eye contact with anyone, and act a little bit crazy. You'll fit right in,' he told me on my first night in the city.

'Oh and take that gold chain off, you can't have that hanging around your neck out there,' he said, as I made my way out of his apartment.

Wearing a three-quarter-length leather coat, bright red Nike trainers, an oversized Stüssy T-shirt and a Chicago Bulls basketball cap, I went out for one of my late-night walks around Manhattan. I looked like a cross between a pimp out of *Starsky & Hutch* and one of the Beastie Boys. As long as

no one got wind of my cockney accent I did indeed *fit right in*. In a city filled with eccentrics, I felt extremely comfortable, and as far as acting *a bit crazy* goes, well, that was my usual modus operandi in the 90s.

We hung out in New York for a few days, checked in with our lawyer to go over the new record deal, and then made our way to Los Angeles. Before going to the airport, I took a cab to America's iconic store Macy's and decided to buy a Game Boy for the plane ride. It came with a RoboCop game, where you had to make your way through each level avoiding missiles coming up out of the ground.

For most of the journey, I am dodging those silo missiles, occasionally taking a break to read a book entitled *No One Here Gets Out Alive*, a biography of Jim Morrison, the lead singer of The Doors. I wanted to find out more about the 60s, the decade of my birth and the counter-culture that changed the world, or where it all went pear-shaped, depending on how you looked at it.

I was going to LA, the place where all of this went down.

Welcome to Hollywood, baby!

Problem is, Los Angeles needed a health warning that we were coming.

On a warm, sunny day in January 1992, we arrive in LA. Steve and I head straight to the Hollywood Hills to drop in on a mate of his named Benny. He was one of his music industry friends, very successful and seriously connected. It just so happened to be the day of Benny's birthday. Coincidence? I think not. Steve's perfect timing? Absolutely.

We knock on the door.

Benny greets us with a huge smile.

'It's so good to see you, Steve,' he says.

'We just got into LA and I thought we would swing by your place first,' replied Steve.

He introduces me to Benny.

'Kenny, welcome to LA.' He said, 'I heard you signed a new deal... Man, that's awesome.'

Benny has got a good vibe about him: I like him immediately.

'Hey, guys, it's my birthday today. I'm having a party and you gotta stay for it,' he insisted.

'Guys, this is my friend, Lenny, he's just flown in from San Francisco for the party,' says Benny.

Lenny was cool, a laid-back dude, and up for a party, big time!

'Lenny, Benny and Kenny...' and we all laughed. This could get confusing and maybe a bit messy.

As with every day in LA, the sun was shining and the vibe was perfect. A party by the pool, looking down as the city sprawled out below us sounded good to me. Steve and I were right up for it. What could possibly go wrong?

We still had our luggage in the car. We hadn't even been to the hotel to check in. We landed only an hour ago and here we are getting bang into the LA scene.

People were yet to arrive, so we really were in early doors.

‘Come on, guys, let’s go for it... let’s get started,’ said Lenny, as he invited me into the kitchen and poured me a large alcoholic drink.

Let’s go for it. He was not kidding.

‘You want some of this, Kenny?’ said Lenny, as he presented me with a tub of crystal-looking white powder.

‘You ever tried this before?’ he said with a cheeky smile. ‘It’s pure MDMA, straight out the lab.’

‘Yeah, I’ve had a dabble before, back in the UK,’ I replied.

‘Not like this you ain’t. This is the best there is,’ he said as he tipped a small amount of it onto a Rizla paper and began to make an ingestible bomb.

I look at Steve, Steve looks at me and says, ‘If you wanna go for it, go for it.’

‘In for a penny, in for a pound,’ I thought. So, in one of my many impulsive and irrational moments I reach out, grab the bomb from Lenny and wash it down quick with the nearest drink. No time to discuss what I was to expect from this chemical compound, or its possible side effects... it was gone. Down the hatch. Too late now.

Judging from Lenny’s constant smile and his euphoric glow, I figured the side effects looked pretty good, and hopefully that will be me in an hour or so.

Steve suggests that we get in the car and head to the hotel to check in and freshen up. It seems people did that. They would turn up for a bit, go home, then return later on.

The drive back to the hotel is very pleasant. I feel extremely relaxed, chilled out and in a good space. The plan is to go to the room, have a quick shower, a change of clothes and then head straight back up to the party.

Standing in the shower... Wooosh! It starts to hit me. This is something else.

I have absolutely no intention of going anywhere right now. The water feels so good as it cascades down onto me. My whole body is buzzing like I've been wired to the mains.

I am not sure how long I stood there in the shower, but my experience was interrupted by the phone ringing. In slow motion I pulled back the shower curtain and saw a phone hanging there on the wall by the toilet. I am thinking, 'Strange place to stick a phone.'

'I know, let's go,' I say to Steve.

'Yeah, let's go...' he replies.

That is all we said to each other. I have got to get out of this hotel and back to Benny's as soon as possible before all normal human function disintegrates.

This is an Ali v Frazier 'Thrilla in Manila' moment. I am on the ropes.

And being hit hard.

I manage to pull myself together, get dressed and make it down to the hotel reception. The receptionist is glowing like the Ready Brek kid; the world outside is super bright and vibrating, as if someone has switched on the LEDs with a few lasers thrown in for good measure.

We head back to the party.

Lenny and Benny greet me with a big hug.

‘How you feeling?’ Lenny asks me.

‘Completely off my trolley, Lenny... but in a good way,’ I reply, with words that become slightly more slurred as my heart rate and breathing ramp up.

‘Cool, man! Enjoy it!’ he says, putting his reassuring arm around me.

Everything has a dreamlike quality to it, and despite the intense but ever-increasing euphoric rushes coming up through my body I am still very lucid.

Lenny was right. This is nothing like I have ever experienced before.

Then came the real test.

‘We are gonna need some bedclothes!’ Benny shouted.

Someone was staying the night.

‘Oh, I’ll go and get them for you,’ said Lenny.

‘What car do you want me to take?’ he asked Benny.

‘Take the convertible Mercedes,’ he replied.

‘Hey, Kenny, you wanna come?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, why not?’ I responded, following Lenny to the car.

What happened next is unparalleled.

With the hood down, Lenny and I took a drive to the shopping mall.

'Lenny, watch out for those missiles!' I screamed.

'What missiles?' he replied.

'If we get hit by one of those we're finished,' I pleaded.

'Don't worry, Kenny, there ain't no missiles, we'll be fine,' Lenny promised.

I shouldn't have bought that Game Boy.

Or perhaps touched Lenny's party powder.

All I know is that for the entire drive I am trapped in the RoboCop game and missiles are coming up out of the road in front of us. They are huge and I watch them thunder past us and into the sky. This is a whole new level of interactive gaming. Lenny and I laugh our heads off while I keep a vigilant eye on those silos.

I have no idea how we got to the mall.

The whole sequence is dreamlike and disconnected.

We're standing in a massive store, in the bedding department. From there I am able to look over a barrier to the landing below us.

'Lenny, we're in the Stock Exchange!' I now shouted.

I could clearly see everyone below wearing bowler hats, vigorously trading.

‘Don’t worry about them,’ Lenny replied. ‘Come with me and you wait here, and I’ll get the bedding.’

He positioned me right next to a king-size bed, complete with duvet and pillows.

The next thing I know... there is a tap on my shoulder.

‘Excuse me, sir, you can’t do that in here,’ said a member of staff.

I am lying down in the bed, fully clothed, having a quick siesta while Lenny is deciding what colour to go for. I don’t remember climbing into it, but it was very comfy.

‘Don’t worry, he’s with me. Come on, Kenny, you’d better get out of there...’ Lenny urged.

Clearly, I was out of my depth, out of my mind, and it was definitely time to get out of bed.

We get back to the party and things are in full swing. I am having a great time... allegedly!

Later I am chilling out on the sofa having a chat with Steve when suddenly there is the most amazing, luminescent dragonfly hovering to the side of his head. I am watching it for quite some time, then Steve suddenly moves his head to one side, opens his mouth and eats it.

‘Do that again,’ I tell him.

‘Do what again?’ he said, looking slightly bemused...

‘Eat the dragonfly,’ I reminded him.

‘What dragonfly?’

‘The one that was next to your head, the one you just swallowed.’

‘I never ate a dragonfly,’ he replied, beginning to laugh.

That in turn set me off, along with Benny and Lenny... The four of us were rolling about.

‘He’s trippin’, man,’ said Lenny.

‘It looked real to me, man,’ I replied, as I sank back into the sofa and went for another tour of La-La Land.

It is like that moment when a hypnotist clicks his fingers and says, ‘You’re back in the room... No, sorry! You’re not back in the room, you’re off again.’

Dragonfly or no dragonfly, I know I was flying that day as my senses crossed one another and opened up a Pandora’s box in my mind.

Meanwhile, back *in* the room I find myself sitting next to a married couple, two of Benny’s friends. Really nice people. We’re having a drink, listening to the tunes, and talking about soul music. They ask me what I am up to, about the new record deal and stuff like that. We were chatting for ages, when in one of my more with-it moments, when my eyes were able to focus, I looked at the guy and said, ‘Hold on, are you Ronald Isley?’

‘Yes, I am,’ he replied with a smile.

‘So that means you must be Angela Winbush?’ I said, looking at his wife.

‘Yes, baby, that’s me,’ she replied.

‘Oh, my goodness, I’ve been sitting here for ages talking to you both without realising who you are. I’m so sorry’ – I confessed embarrassingly.

‘Don’t worry, baby, that’s OK,’ said Angela. ‘We’re all good.’

It was an awesome moment for me because I am a big fan of both The Isley Brothers and Angela Winbush. Two soul music legends right there!

They were more interested in asking little old insignificant me about my fledging music career than talking about themselves. No self-interest there, nothing to prove, just a level of humility that spoke volumes. Ego has left the building!

Of course, I switched the conversation and revealed that I have all of their albums on vinyl. Being a soul music fan, that was a given. Ronald then told me about the early days of The Isley Brothers and the making of those iconic records. Thankfully no dragonflies got in the way this time. Clearly Steve was the only one with an appetite for insects that day.

Eventually we made it back to the hotel in the early hours. Again, I don’t remember getting there, but I know that’s where I woke up the following morning feeling as right as rain. Like nothing had happened, but it did happen. It was a totally mad experience and not forgotten in a hurry. Whatever that was, it is probably best confined to the lab.

Don’t try this at home, folks!

Unless you're accompanied by an adult called Lenny.

A couple of nights later after too many beers, and a bit of coercion from me, Steve and I decided that we would find the house that Jim Morrison lived in during the 60s. I wanted to see the very place that I was reading about in his biography. All I knew was that it was in the Laurel Canyon Hills. Not exactly a precise location but it was a start. No Google Maps back then.

If Steve and I had some survival gear and were prepared to navigate through those hills, I reckon we would have found it within a week or so. But luckily for us, Cassandra Mills said she knew where it was. So, with Steve in the front, and me crammed into the back, Cassandra drove us there in her Porsche 911.

'It's over there, you can't miss it,' she said, as she pointed into the darkness.

Making our way up the lane we found a big house. Climbing over a small fence, Steve and I made our way into the garden. Suddenly! Bosh! On came a very bright security light followed by some noise from the house.

'Oh shit! It's the wrong house,' said Steve. 'Run!'

I am thinking – no one here gets out alive.

In a trigger-happy US where intruders are definitely not welcome, we ran for our lives, scrambled over the fence, sprinted down the lane, and lay low for a few minutes before we continued our search for Jim's gaff.

Then we find it. It was empty, derelict, boarded up, with a tall wire fence surrounding it. Yes, you couldn't miss it, unless you were drunk.

Like two naughty kids we climbed the wire fence and made our way inside. We were clearly not the first to do so, because there was some graffiti on one of the walls, no doubt from fans and ageing hippies to one of rock'n'roll's most controversial figures.

I wasn't even a massive Doors fan.