

The First Two Pages: “Messin’ With The Kid”

By Steve Liskow, *Black Cat Mystery Magazine*

On the second Saturday in July a few years ago, my wife and I sat on the terrace of the Black Rose restaurant and waited for the local fireworks to begin in the park a quarter-mile away. We had a perfect view, which was why we had reservations for that restaurant on that night. My wife took a selfie of us and tagged it “Black Rose and the Fireworks.” I commented that it sounded like the name of a band.

And there you go.

Several of my stories involve music, usually rock or blues. The band name quickly became Blackie Rose and the Fireworks, which sounded to me like a blues band and I immediately asked myself, “How can you kill a performing musician onstage and get away with it?”

When I’m writing a novel, I usually have a fairly clear idea of who the culprit is and why he or she did it. That’s not true in a short story. Once I have a general premise, I start writing and know it may take me several drafts to find what the story is really “about.” More often than not, I struggle to find the correct place to begin. My general rule of thumb, which I learned in playwriting (a skill I never mastered, by the way), is to start *in medias res*, the middle of things. I try to

present characters and conflict immediately and avoid backstory. It sounds easy, but I almost always need several drafts to find the best opening.

The opening is like an elevator pitch, that ultra-tight synopsis you polish and present to the agent you meet in the elevator on the way to the lobby. You have four floors to pique his interest, so start with the big stuff: Protagonist, Premise, Conflict and Setting. Maybe you can get stakes in there. Your opening should show readers how to read your story, too. Is it humorous, serious, dark, romantic, or a combination of these? Tone and attitude help depict my characters.

The manuscript that went to *Black Cat* is labeled “G,” which means there were six earlier drafts over the course of about three months. I sent it to the first of several markets in October, three months after those July fireworks. The first two sentences tell us Blackie is dead and where he died. The third sentence gives us the protagonist, Hartford detective Tracy “Trash” Hendrix, who shows up in several of my novels, too. The conflict, of course, is who killed the guy?

Here is what felt like the most effective opening:

Blackie Rose lay on the stage, his feet flanking the microphone stand and his eyes wide open. An hour ago, he’d been knocking the fans dead at Big Mama’s BBQ & Blues Bar.

Payback, Hartford detective Tracy Hendrix reflected, *is a bitch*.

“Christ, I can’t believe it.”

Eddie Leyland, the band’s manager, seemed to use the phrase as a mantra. He’d said it at least a hundred times since Hendrix showed him his ID, and it still didn’t help much. The rest of Blackie’s band, the Fireworks, looked as stunned as he did.

Leyland looked at the now-empty tables. “Christ. Blackie woulda been bigger than Little Walter, Sonny Boy Williamson, Junior Wells, Paul Oscher...”

Hendrix assumed those were other harmonica players. His father changed the spelling of his own name because he worshipped Jimi Hendrix, but that was a long time ago, and the son wasn't the blues fan his old man was. His partner, Jimmy Byrne, interviewed a girl who wore her jeans so low everyone knew she was a natural blonde. Her eyes flicked around the room and Hendrix was pretty sure it wasn't just shock.

The Medical Examiner closed his bag and stood up.

“I'm seeing some white residue around your boy's nostrils, Mr. Leyland. Did Blackie Rose use cocaine?”

“No. Absolutely not. Christ, I can't believe it.”

“Mr. Leyland, work with us here, OK?” Hendrix watched the whole band not look at him. “It's not like we're going to arrest him for possession.”

“Well, maybe a little, but only, you know, recreational. Not steady or anything.”

“So if he did a line before going on, this might be an overdose.”

“Christ, I can't believe it.”

The girl ran her hand through that long blonde hair and started watching the ceiling, all four corners at once. Byrne dumped her purse on the stage and sorted through the clutter. He held up a small plastic envelope.

“Christ,” Leyland said again. “I can't believe it.”

The first paragraph gives us the setting and a dead body, the “who,” “what,” and “where.” The second paragraph gives us the protagonist and hints at the story's tone, darkly humorous. I maintain that tone with the “Christ, I can't believe it.” Not only do I say that the manager has said the line over and over, I have him repeat it twice more in the next page. It still doesn't help (more of the humor, understatement).

The sixth paragraph gives us some background on Hendrix and hints at a music connection through the real harmonica players. His partner Jimmy Byrne questions a girl and the comment about her low-cut jeans is both visual and suggestive (and maintains that tone). Groupie? Druggie? Both? The medical examiner amplifies this with his question about cocaine.

Introducing my cops sets up a continuing joke in the series, too. “Tracy” is nicknamed “Trash,” and the other Hartford cops refer to these two as “Trash and Byrne.” Hendrix’s observation that they won’t arrest the dead man for possession shows his dark humor and keeps the tone chugging along. Tone and rhythm make humor succeed or fail. I taught English for 33 years and know my grammar, but I depend on my ear more than on the schoolbooks.

Let’s look at the next section:

Neither could Dan the drummer, Maurice the bassist, Jerome the guitar player or Zandra the keyboard player. They all admitted to “a little recreational use,” mostly after the show if a girl showed up with her own stuff to share. Hendrix thought that was an ambiguous term, too, especially since Zandra and Rose shared a motel room.

“OK,” he said. “Let’s rule out everything else. None of you got a shock playing your instruments, right?”

They all shook their heads. The sound guys and light guys didn’t notice any power surge, either. Then Jerome mentioned that Blackie was pushing from the second they came onstage.

“How do you mean?”

Jerome shrugged. “He just seemed to be working at it more tonight, like it wasn’t really there for him.”

Zandra’s pierced eyebrow glittered in the lights. “We play this stuff every night, Jerry and I play our solos exactly the same so

Blackie can come in at the end. His solos change, but he's the star so that's how it works. But tonight, it felt like he didn't trust the music."

"Uh-huh." Hendrix wondered how she could play keyboards with nails longer than his own fingers.

"Before the show, I thought maybe he was sick," Jerome said.

"Like maybe he ate something."

"Why would you think that?" Hendrix saw Byrne hand Cocaine Girl off to a uniform. She looked so young he wondered if they could even charge her as an adult.

"He was sweating like an ox." Jerome looked at the others, who nodded. "I mean, he always works up a sweat, we all do, but it was pouring off him like Niagara Falls."

"Maybe the coke?" Hendrix asked.

"Nah," Dan the drummer said. "If it was coke, he'da speeded up, but I had to slow down to stay with him."

The first two paragraphs of this section name the other band members, who are main suspects, and gives us another PG sexual innuendo. Then Hendrix starts ruling out other possible causes of death. Accidental electrocution comes off the table quickly. Then the musicians say that Blackie seemed to be in an altered state, but that his behavior and symptoms were NOT consistent with coke. We also get some insight into how this band interacts on stage. After all, it's Blackie's band and he's the star. He gets the big solos.

The first two pages give the conflict, setting, tone, protagonist and several suspects. They also rule out two possible causes of death (cocaine and electrocution) and encourage the reader to work along with the detectives and think about other methods, and maybe a motive. If the reader gets involved in the action, we both have more fun.

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His novels deal with issues such as teen sex-trafficking, a shooting in a public school, and teen drug abuse. *The Kids Are All Right* was a finalist for the Shamus Award for Best Indie Novel. He published *Back Door Man*, his fourteenth novel, in November. A guitar player since the British Invasion, he uses song titles or lyrics for many of his titles (including this one).

He lives in central Connecticut with his wife Barbara and Ernie, a rescued Maine Coon cat.