

The First Two Pages of “Detox Mansion” by Nick Mamatas
From *Lawyers, Guns, and Money:*
Crime Fiction Inspired by the Music of Warren Zevon,
edited by Libby Cudmore and Art Taylor (Down & Out Books)

An Essay by Nick Mamatas

I never had many records—not vinyl, not cassettes, not CDs—as a kid. It was just a combination of money, and space in the small Brooklyn railroad apartment in which I grew up, and the fact that my parents weren’t very musical. As a teen, I found music via two methods: the veritable left of the dial of FM radio, and music magazines. My favorite was *Creem*, which was utterly hilarious. The photo captions were absurdist jokes, the coverage ranged from top stars to obscure local acts, and the writing was actually good. *Creem* was that magazine for the highly educated music fan, the former romantic turned cynic after 45 revolutions of fads and overdoses and innovative new sounds. There was a weird kind of freedom not found in other magazines, and I read every little magazine and alternative weekly newspaper I could get my hands on.

The end result is that I did not come to Warren Zevon from hearing “Werewolves of London” or one of his other perennial AOR hits, but from a feature article in *Creem* about his album *Sentimental Hygiene* and his drug problems. (Several singles did get some radio play, and “Leave My Monkey Alone” was even an inexplicable music video that ran on MTV now and

again. I did eventually get my hands on the cassette.) The craft of the personality profile is located in the telling detail. Zevon's drug troubles boiled down to one anecdote: he'd be giving radio interviews and just black out. There's nothing more worrisome to a radio station owner than a moment of dead air. That stuck with me for decades, and I started "Detox Mansion" with my protagonist crashing out during a radio station interview.

"Dead air! Dead air!" the producer hissed into the jock's ear from the control room. The PR person waved frantically at her client through the glass. The jock exercised all his willpower to keep from snapping his fingers in the face of our hero.

"Well," the jock finally said. "Let's let the music do the talking." Then he pushed a cart into the player, hit the button, lowered the volume on the mics, and said, "Get this asshole the fuck out of here, now!"

Everything else spills out from there.

I'd argue that this is all the craft a short story needs too—just some moment that tantalizes the reader. This is not the same as the usual, and awful, advice to start a story with "a hook." "Start with a hook" is bad advice, ultimately, because of the word "hook." A hook is an important part of a story to be sure and could be anywhere. It is the motor of the story—it can be the twist at the end, the broad concept, the compelling change a character undergoes, the language or clever structure of a piece . . . whatever makes a story worth reading is its hook. A hook may go in the beginning,

but it need not. Beginnings are for something else. The start of a story, its first paragraph, should assure the reader that they are in capable hands.

Creem not only hooked me but tantalized me and kept me tantalized for thirty-five years.

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