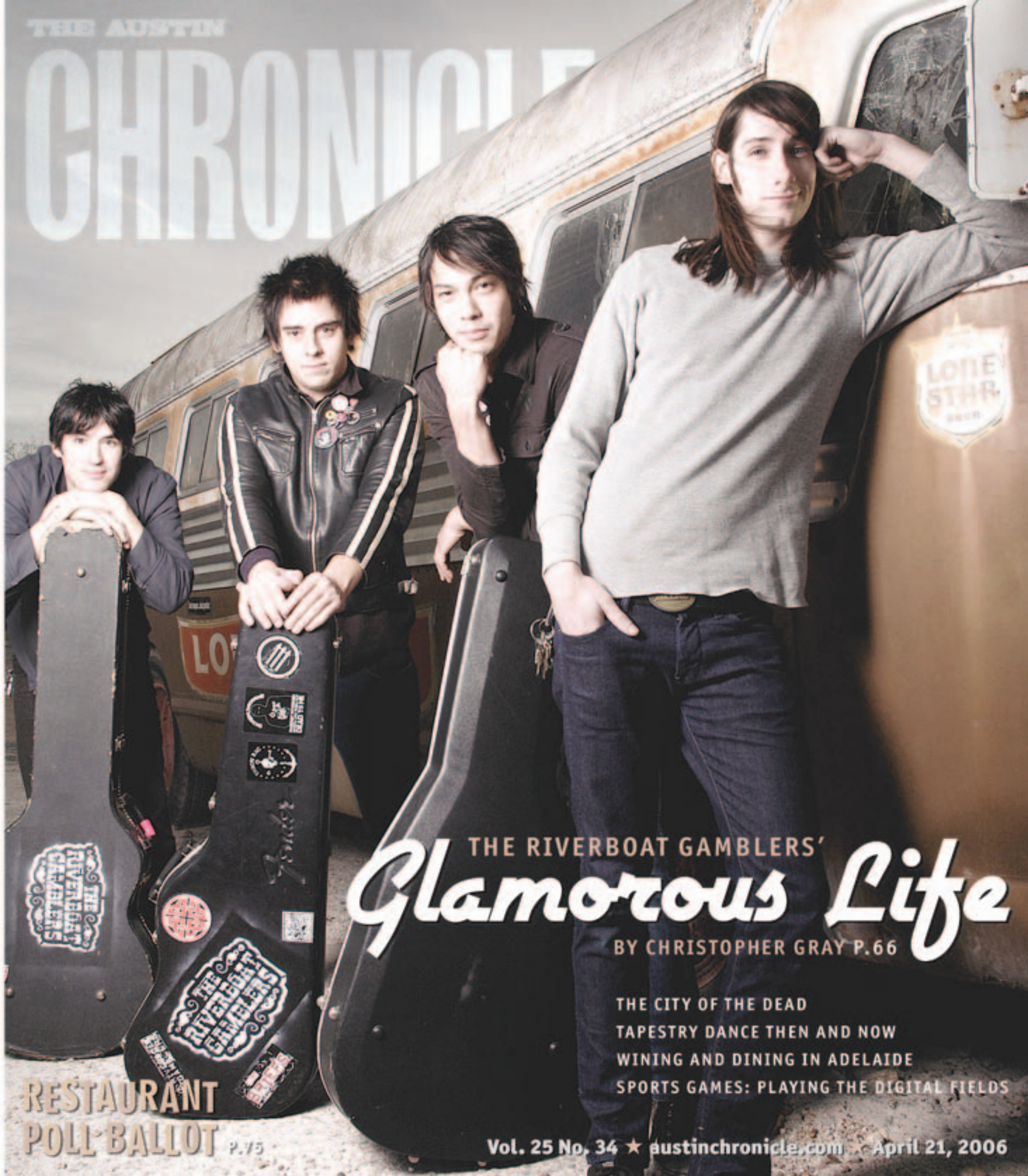


THE AUSTIN
CHRONICLE



old brother hubbard

THE RIVERBOAT GAMBLERS'
Glamorous Life

BY CHRISTOPHER GRAY P.66

THE CITY OF THE DEAD
TAPESTRY DANCE THEN AND NOW
WINING AND DINING IN ADELAIDE
SPORTS GAMES: PLAYING THE DIGITAL FIELDS

RESTAURANT
POLL-BALLOT P.75

Vol. 25 No. 34 ★ austinchronicle.com April 21, 2006

Let It Bleed

The Riverboat Gamblers take aim at their enemies

BY CHRISTOPHER GRAY



Soul Searching (l-r):
Ian MacDougal,
Fadi al-Assad,
Mike Wiebe,
and Pat Lillard

ALBERT EDWARDS

Before they became one of the Lone Star State's top-drawing punk bands, before they relocated from Denton to Austin for convenience's sake, and before they were written up in the latest issue of *Rolling Stone* as one of SXSW 06's five breakout bands, the Gamblers played because it was fun.

The Great State of Texas, whose image has been battered and bruised more than a champion bull-rider in recent years, couldn't ask for better cultural ambassadors than Austin's Riverboat Gamblers. Picture a dank, dilapidated Parisian hostel, no doubt hundreds of years old, walls in disrepair, pipes exposed, naked light bulbs dangling from the ceiling, bunk beds arrayed barracks-style in the rooms. Squats such as these, for acts who haven't quite worked up to tour buses and five-star hotels, are often the only European alternative to sleeping in the van.

One night in 2003, touring second album *Something to Crow About* (Gearhead), the end was in sight for the Gamblers. Before boarding that plane back to God's Country, there was one last all-day drive, one more show, then an all-night slog to the airport, the band praying their lack of rest wouldn't deposit them at the bottom of some picturesque Alpine ravine. As their final chance for at least the next 36 hours, all they wanted was some sleep.

They might have gotten it, too, except such establishments are also popular with amorous local couples too broke or cheap to spring for a hotel room. Singer Mike Wiebe hadn't even had time to drift off before, in his words, "this French guy and his girlfriend broke into our room and started fucking in the bed right next to me." Bearing in mind he was still a guest in their country, and after discussing the situation with a bandmate, he decided to ignore it.

"I crawled back into bed, and within arm's reach I see this hairy French ass going up and down," Wiebe recounts. "I realized, 'I can't handle this.'"

Not on speaking terms with the French tongue, the frontman woke the band's Dutch tour manager and asked him to request that the lovers kindly take their copulation elsewhere. "You do not have to speak in French," said the girl. "I understand, and it is fine. We will leave."

Problem solved? Not quite.

Wiebe politely thanked mademoiselle for her consideration and she assured him, "It is fine, I am not angry." Pregnant pause. "But 'e is." At which point her companion began hurling every last bit of French invective under *le soleil* at the exasperated Texans. ("It always sounds mildly feminine," muses Gamblers guitarist Fadi al-Assad.) Still playing the gracious foreigner, Wiebe let him rip, figuring monsieur had a right to be pissed off because "he probably didn't get a nut." But then, suddenly speaking perfect English, the Frenchman crossed a line: "Fuck you and your useless Texas."

As they say, them's fightin' words.

"That really got to me, because we got that the whole tour: 'You're from Texas, why do you let George W. Bush be president?'" Wiebe says.

He learned that, however much they may love the music, Europeans don't want to hear that a punk rock band from Texas barely scraping by has minimal influence on the American electoral process. They also don't want to hear the perennial Yankee retort that if not for the USA, they'd all be eating sauerkraut and speaking German, but Wiebe couldn't help himself.

"We've traveled all over the world now, and Texas is my home," he says. "It just came out. I had been wanting to say that the entire tour, but always as a joke. Now I actually meant it."

□

Three years later, the incident is immortalized as "The Gamblers Try Their Hand at International Diplomacy" on the quintet's new Volcom LP, *To the Confusion of Our Enemies*. For reasons that have nothing to do with increasingly unpopular presidents or an enraged Frenchman — who was, Wiebe notes, eventually "pushed out" of the Gamblers' room — they're proud of their heritage.

"I think [Texas] bands are a lot more aggressive," remarks bassist Pat Lillard, gathered with Wiebe and al-Assad as the third founding member of the Gamblers. Absent are second guitarist Ian MacDougal and Dallas-dwelling drummer Mark Baker. "We make our scene, we don't have people making it for us like in Hollywood and New York."

continued on p.68

Before they became one of the Lone Star State's top-drawing punk bands, before they relocated from Denton to Austin for convenience's sake, and before they were written up in the latest issue of *Rolling Stone* as one of SXSW 06's five breakout bands, the Gamblers played because it was fun. It really is that simple. In Denton, after all, besides skateboarding and playing *Street Fighter 2* at the local arcade, there wasn't much else to do.

"Fadi and I were in a van huffing gas on top of a scabies-ridden mattress," remembers Lillard, perhaps exaggerating the squalor of the Gamblers' summer 1997 origins. "He and I were in another band at the time, and we didn't want to be in that band, so we started this one." Wiebe came aboard exactly one practice and Olan Mills photo shoot later.

Though the small college town north of Dallas-Fort Worth has always been better known for bands that prefer My Bloody Valentine to the Misfits, at the time Denton also housed a healthy, if extremely underground, punk scene. At some point, Wiebe, Lillard, and al-Assad were all in four or five bands at once. Instead of clubs, shows took place at a handful of houses, including Wiebe's and Lillard's. Someone always seemed to know someone who knew a touring band coming through the area, which is how At the Drive-In, Jimmy Eat World, Dillinger Four, Scared of Chaka, Rainer Maria, Alkaline Trio, and many others wound up rocking various North Texas living rooms. Since the shows were happening at their houses, the Gamblers had no problem inserting themselves on the bill, with one important difference. Buried under a tide of plaintive guitars and hyperconfessional lyrics, they decided sloppy and stupid was more their speed.

"There was a lot of really, really pretentious emo [at the time], just way over the top," says Wiebe. "[Bands] had names like the Snow Is Falling on the Wet Trees on Sunday. I think part of the appeal of the Riverboat Gamblers was it just seemed kind of dumb."

Wiebe likewise noticed a response from the Gamblers' audience none of his other bands claimed. Though several side projects remained somewhat active, even today, the trio focused more and more energy on the Gamblers, recording a 7-inch and venturing outside Denton to living rooms, basements, and even the occasional club around the region. In early 2001, they headed into Austin's Sweatbox Studios with DIY icon Tim Kerr. The self-titled result on D.C.'s Beatville Records, now so obscure even the band members can't find a copy, took all of three days to record. It features a cover of "Slug," in tribute to the then-recently passed Joey Ramone, and 11 other firecrackers exploding with nervous energy.

"I think we played one song, and Tim came out and said, 'You gotta go buy some beer,'" remembers Lillard. "Loosen up."

Seasoned by two years of steady touring, the Gamblers again enlisted Sweatbox and Kerr for *Something to Crow About*, which took six days this time and remains in print. On it, their footing is much firmer, especially on balls-out rave-ups like "What's What," "Rattle Me Bones" and "Hey! Hey! Hey!" Wiebe's true-life tales of razor blades, pills, posers, and suicide notes play out as harrowing as they are invigorating; there's even a love song, "Catch Your Eye."

"That record was the first time we had ideas," chuckles Wiebe.

continued on p.70



Rattle Me Bones

Mr. Wiebe Goes to the Chiropractor

Never let it be said that Mike Wiebe hasn't suffered for his art. In fact, the Riverboat Gamblers singer suffers on a daily basis. Years of hyperactive frontman behavior – whipping his head around, climbing amplifiers and rafters, diving into the crowd, Chaplin-esque pratfalls – makes great entertainment, but has left him with chronic aches and pains, frequent headaches, trouble sleeping, and worse.

"I got a pretty bad laceration in New York here," he says, pointing to a wicked scar on his right forearm. "I fell on a pint glass and gashed it bad. It took 17 stitches. The cab driver took me to [NYC charity hospital] Bellevue, and it took them six hours to see me. There were gunshot wounds, and some guy had burnt his top lip off on a crack pipe."

He's also had a few concussions from "knocking into stuff" (mostly his bandmates' guitars) but insists they weren't intentional.

"It's not like a GG Allin let's-hurt-ourselves kind of thing," insists Wiebe. "Really, it's like a dozen shows out of hundreds."

To better fathom the physical toll of those shows, the *Chronicle* arranged for Wiebe to consult with local chiropractor Dr. Cynthia J. Schade at the Active Life Chiropractic Clinic on West Sixth Street. After taking his measurements (6 foot 3 inches, 167 lbs.) and watching a brief introductory video on the basic tenets and history of chiropractic, a discipline founded in 1895 and based on locating and correcting "interferences" in the spinal column, Dr. Schade begins her exam.

Early on, it's fairly obvious Wiebe has plenty of interference. Dr. Schade's measurements reveal his left side to be an inch higher than the right. "If these muscles are drawn up here, it's going to pull the shoulder blade up. Same with his ears. See how his left ear is a little more forward than the right?"

Dr. Schade has Wiebe do a series of bending and stretching exercises resembling calisthenics. His right sacroiliac joint, which connects the bottom of the spine to the pelvis, is "not moving at all," likely due to his trademark pratfalls, long hours of sitting in the Gamblers' van, and the repetitive motion of his day job washing dishes at Spider House. She calls this "a hitch in his get-along," which often leads to lower-back and leg pain.

Wiebe's sharpest pain comes when Dr. Schade probes the area where his neck meets left shoulder blade. It's swollen and inflamed, and the muscles are bunched up in a knot. Wiebe says it's plagued him since last summer's Warped Tour. When she raises his head, effectively straightening out the vertebrae, the pain eases considerably. It's the same sort of ailment that befalls people who get whiplash in a car accident, and frequently causes headaches.

"When a person has damage in here, I recommend the patient get X-rays," she tells him. "What I can't tell just from an exam is if it's predominantly muscular, or if there's damage severe enough that it's caused ligament instability. With ligament instability, a lot of times the muscles tighten up because they're trying to stabilize your neck. It's solvable, but sometimes when people keep aggravating things, it gets harder to fix."

Until Wiebe can get his neck X-rayed, Dr. Schade recommends he put ice on his neck and do exercises to smooth out the muscles (basically tucking his chin into his throat). Like all too many musicians, Wiebe has no health insurance, though he says he's considered applying for the Health Alliance for Austin Musicians. The X-rays will run about \$60.

A week later, Wiebe says he's decided to get them. To pay for it, he says, "I'm just going to work an extra shift."

– C.G.

PHOTOS BY AUBREY EDWARDS

Something to Crow About, and its reception in punk-rock circles, was the Gamblers' first inkling they might have a future as a band. They moved to Austin, where, says al-Assad, "instead of trying to take time off work to tour, we just try to find work when we're at home." They were on the road so much at this point that full-time employment was a fantasy anyway, and labels began to take notice. Big labels, that in the wake of the Strokes, White Stripes, and Hives each wanted their own raucous "garage-rock" band.

Even as their fortunes continue to improve, the Gamblers know all too well how much it has cost.

Things chilled somewhat after the Stripes' *Elephant* was the lone follow-up to maintain mainstream momentum, but the Gamblers' experiences being wooed by music-biz "douchebags" are all over the new album, most prominently on "The Biz Loves Sluts" and "The Art of Getting F#@%ed," which Wiebe calls "kind of our theme song." They went with Volcom because the A&R rep for the Orange County label (also home to Austin's Single Frame) genuinely liked the music.

"Anything we know about the music business, we know from learning the hard way," says Wiebe.

RIVERBOAT GAMBLERS To the Confusion of Our Enemies (Volcom)

The Riverboat Gamblers have long been perennial short-listers for best live rock band in the state. The Austin quintet's performance ethic combines feral shit-shaking with nut-tight delivery in a manner that consistently leaves audiences gasping for air. Getting all that energy across on a studio recording is a tall order indeed. Although *To the Confusion of Our Enemies* is no substitute for a Gamblers' show, the album's souped-up, top-down sound casts a few charms in its own right. Even without the sight of vocalist Mike Wiebe swinging like a monkey from the rafters, it's easy to imagine a fist-pumping affirmation like "Don't Bury Me ... I'm Still Not Dead" faring comfortably in the sweet spot between the Foo Fighters and the Hives. Ditto for the ultra-contagious "On Again Off Again," which rides sneering, call-and-response vocals and a spaghetti-western-flavored bridge straight to the "it" button. A swirl of organ and saxophone add a hallucinatory texture to "Year of the Rooster," while the weapons-grade segue between "The Gamblers Try Their Hand at International Diplomacy" and "Walk Around Me" is a textbook example of slow-building toward chaotic release. It's all in a day's work for these prime purveyors of Friday night catharsis.

★★★

Working with producer Mudrock (Alice Cooper, Avenged Sevenfold), the Gamblers recorded *To the Confusion of Our Enemies* in seven weeks last fall at his studio in Highland Park, Calif. It was, says Lillard, "the time of our lives." If it sounds slightly slicker than their first two albums, it's because band and producer had ample time to explore every last detail of the recording process.

"Mudrock's wife Ai was part of the production team, and she made it sound like fuckin'



- Greg Beets

angels," crows al-Assad. "That's what you're hearing, man."

Even as their fortunes continue to improve, the Gamblers know all too well how much it has cost. Their high-voltage live shows have frequently resulted in bodily injury, most often to Wiebe (see sidebar "Rattle Me Bones"), but most seriously to Lillard. At San Francisco's Parkside in 2003, on the first song of the set, Wiebe whipped his microphone around by the cord and caught Lillard flush in the mouth. It knocked out

four teeth, to the tune of several thousand dollars in dental work and weeks of recovery time, but Lillard kept playing for four songs before nearly passing out from blood loss.

"I looked over at him, and it looked like he was vomiting blood," says al-Assad. "Except it was coming straight out of his mouth, and he was seriously white, like a sheet of fucking paper."

The emotional price has been just as steep. "I've lost a girlfriend, I've lost my license, my car, jobs, school," says Lillard, "but I have great friends that let me stay with them and give me jobs when I'm home."

The Gamblers still sleep on floors on the road, and at home hold various part-time positions in the construction, dish-washing, food preparation, and telephone-solicitation industries. Whenever Wiebe, who has a bachelor's degree in psychology, wonders if life in the straight world would be easier, he remembers friends from the old days who've gone that route and approach him at shows to tell him how much they've come to regret it.

"Some of them have kids and families, and they'll say, 'I am so fucking miserable,'" he says. "Please keep playing in a band. I'm so happy that one of my friends is doing something that he likes because I hate my job so much. I hate the insurance company that I work for."

"I don't know what to make of that," Wiebe admits. "But I'm glad I'm not working for an insurance company."

The Riverboat Gamblers play a CD release in-store 5pm Tuesday, April 25, at Waterloo Records, hit Rudyard's in Houston Thursday, April 27, and return home, hopefully in one piece, sometime in early June.

At Cheapo Discs We Give You **CASH!** For All Your Unwanted CD's, DVD's & LP's

WE PAY CASH FOR CD's
Cheapo
discs & dvd's

open 'til midnight
Austin
recent arrivals daily

VOTED BEST USED CD STORE FOR FOURTH STRAIGHT YEAR!

10th & Lamar
www.cheapotexas.com
512.477.4499
CD's & DVD's BOUGHT & SOLD

10TH & LAMAR • 477-4499
WWW.CHEAPOTEXAS.COM

GET BACK AT EVERYONE WHO EVER YELLED

TURN DOWN THAT MUSIC!

MUSIC GO ROUND®

The world's largest used musical instrument retailer is expanding in your area. We're looking for qualified candidates to own and operate their own franchise. With our extensive training, support and new product programs, we can help turn your passion for music into a career reality. Visit www.musicgoround.com or call **800-269-4076** today. Go ahead, crank it up to eleven!