

LIKE A GANG

JESSE MALIN: The thing with the Strokes is they were a real band. A band should be a gang, running down the street, chasing a bus, breaking windows, breaking hearts. Those guys had that.

NICK VALENSI: We felt like a gang.

NIKOLAI FRAITURE: We thought that's what a band was.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: That was something we actually really thought about. I remember being like, "No, we have to all go together." When we walk down the street and they see five guys, people would yell out, "The Beatles!" The idea is, if they're yelling that out and they don't even know who we are, they'll come to the show. One day they'll see something in *Time Out* and be like, "Oh, I remember those guys, they're always hanging out and getting drunk." Plus, it makes it easier if you're trying to meet a girl: "Here's a flyer." It's a starting point for a conversation. We made really, really cool flyers.

JOE LEVY: I first met them at a Weezer show at Irving Plaza. Albert and Fab followed me into the bathroom to give me a gig flyer while I was at the urinal.

J. P. BOWERSOCK: They had branding before people even talked about branding. One of them would mail out these elaborate postcards with brilliant graphics. And somewhere along the line, Julian had tried working for his father's modeling agency, which didn't work out, but when they had shows he persuaded some of the models to come. Word got out about that. It was a brilliant move. This was back before the Internet. The Internet was a few message boards and e-mail and porn. They hadn't figured out what to do with the

Internet yet. But with the Strokes, you'd get this beautiful card in the mail and you'd think, "Interesting."

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: The flyers thing was all thanks to my dad, really.

NICK VALENSI: Albert moved to New York with a credit card that his dad paid the bill for.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: When I told him I was leaving college, I was like, "I'm kind of scared but, you know, we have this chance." His dad, weirdly enough, did the same thing for him. His dad, who had no money, bought him amps and guitars for the whole band, so I feel like maybe he was just paying it forward.

NICK VALENSI: When it came time to get gear, those little things that are necessary in a band can add up. Guitar strings, cables, this guy needs a bunch of drumsticks because he keeps breaking them, we need a PA for our rehearsal room. It doesn't seem like a lot, but I didn't have guitar strings and guitar cables, and now all of a sudden we did. I'm very grateful and appreciative to Albert Hammond Sr. for paying those fucking credit card bills.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: Nick would do some bookings, I would do some bookings. I remember Julian saying, "No, not Tuesday, we have to get Thursday or Friday," and so we'd go back, "Sorry, man, can't do it Tuesday." It was just funny, the back-and-forth. You're young and you feel like you have good stuff, you can have a little bit of an attitude. You need to have a little bit of an attitude.

RYAN GENTLES: They were so hardworking at promoting themselves, all five of them, all the time. In some bands it would be like, "Maybe tell that guy to stay home." But not with them. Girls were swooning and they were just so cool. Nick and Julian, they're tall, imposing figures; you notice them.

KELLY KILEY: That's what made them so appealing. In a weird way they were like a boy band: "That one's the dreamy one," and so on.

STEVEN TRACHTENBROIT: With the Strokes, there were five personalities, like the Beatles. I'm certainly not comparing them to the Beatles, music-wise, but in terms of you had your John, Ringo, George, and Paul. Later, they each got their own individual *Spin* covers.

JENNY ELISCU: They were all very engaging, immediately.

KELLY KILEY: They were just this gang, this force that was going to take on the world.

NICK VALENSI: We'd print up like a thousand flyers, and then each of us would take a couple of hundred and go out and go hit the town, go to whatever club was going on, Spa or Sway or Shout!, whatever those cheesy things were called.

JUSTINE D: They were running around at the clubs. The Strokes were younger, and they didn't care about promoting themselves or saying certain things or making out with certain girls. Which was cool because you felt like you couldn't penetrate them, in a way.

JASON GORDON: They were detached from the scene and they were everything cool about the scene at the same time. They had that gang mentality that everyone seemed to want to be part of. They were the cool table. I hate to put it like that, but it's true, they were the cool kids. And then they were writing these amazing garage rock anthems.

JUSTINE D: For some reason I remember what I wore to their first show at Tiswas: red boots and a red leopard-print blouse and tight black jeans. They played to five people, but I walked in and I thought, "Who's this pretty good band? They're all really good-looking." You don't see that very often. Like, where they sound good and all the band members are handsome. But what was so strange about them was right after they were going around the audience with magazine copies of *V*—and I still have the magazine—they were featured in *V* magazine before they even got big, I guess because of their family connections. And a few of us thought, "What a strange band that they're already in a notable high-fashion magazine and no one really knows who they are." But they created such a buzz about themselves. Back then, if you outright self-promoted, it was frowned upon.

NIKOLAI FRAITURE: We were always serious. I mean, it was always: this is what we're going to do. I know I had nothing else. No plan B.

NICK VALENSI: Those parties were fun, don't get me wrong, but part of it, for me, felt like, "This is work. This is going to be my job, I'm going to Shout! tonight and I'm going to talk to a million people and hand out all these flyers and get these people to come see my band."

PAUL BANKS: I must have crossed paths with the Strokes at Bar 13. I wish I could have met them and bro'd down with them, you know? I do. I'm a great admirer. And I'm sure they had better coke.

JUSTINE D: They were naughty.

MATT BERNINGER: After that show I saw them play at Don Hill's; everybody went to Mars Bar and they were there too. I remember Julian Casablancas looking down the bar at the girl who I was with. He was looking at us and giving her bedroom eyes. I was like, "Jesus Christ, this guy can do anything!" Like, literally, if he had walked up and kissed her, she would have walked out the door with him, you know? I was like, "Fuck, that guy is cool."

KELLY KILEY: Boyfriends didn't like the Strokes.

NICK VALENSI: Getting a gig at the Mercury Lounge was the goal. There was no higher echelon than that. The Mercury Lounge would have national touring bands that came through. Real bands. Bands who weren't from New York. And there would be a tour bus outside. There were no tour buses parked outside the fucking Luna Lounge.

RYAN GENTLES: I really liked booking my band's shows and trying to get us press. I liked all that stuff. When my band broke up I knew I didn't want to start another band because they're pains in the ass, but I liked the idea of helping other bands.

BRIAN LONG: Ryan was just this cool, enthusiastic kid. He had been in a band. And then he realized that he was better at not being in a band.

RYAN GENTLES: I interned at Geffen and at the Mercury Lounge when I was at school. When I was done interning, they gave me a job working the door and assisting the booker at Mercury. Then she left, I was done with school in the summer of '99, and I got her job.

JIM MERLIS: Ryan was my intern at Geffen Records. My assistant, Anna, referred to him as "Weezer" because he looked like Rivers.

BRIAN LONG: We all called him Weezer.

JIM MERLIS: It turned out he was a card-carrying member of the Weezer fan club. We didn't know that until years later. He always had this really funny smile around the office, like he was up to something.

RYAN GENTLES: There are certain bands you like, and then certain bands you don't like, but you have to book them. I'd always book the ones I liked together and the bands I didn't like together. I'd say, "If they like that, then they probably like this other shitty band." And then I'd put all the bands I liked on one night, like, "I'll have something fun to look forward to." It's not like any of those bands were friends, though everybody kind of ended up knowing each other. There was no science behind it. I was twenty-one.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: Ryan was *the* guy. We'd started playing around, and after you play around for a while, you meet people. There was a time when I ran into him probably fifteen times just out at shows and stuff.

RYAN GENTLES: I wasn't friends with them at all but every time I went out they were there in the audience for the show, all five of them. "You guys are out again?" They were like a gang out promoting all the time. It got to the point where it was somewhat embarrassing.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: It's funny to think about now, because he's one of my best friends, but it was like, "There's Ryan Gentles. Should we go talk to him?" He was a big deal.

JULIAN CASABLANCAS: I met him once outside of Arlene's Grocery. I was, like, some punk kid, "Oh, you wanna manage us?" He'd probably remember better, but I think I was pretty direct with him.

RYAN GENTLES: The Strokes asked me three or four times to manage them.

JULIAN CASABLANCAS: He was the man that everyone wanted—he booked Mercury, he had power, so he was probably used to people kind of posturing in front of him. He was, you know, playing it cool, acting unimpressed.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: We wanted to get to the Mercury Lounge, and we wanted to sell it out.

RYAN GENTLES: I wasn't managing anybody at that point. I was a booker at a club. I told the Strokes no two or three times. I made twenty-eight grand a year, I'm on easy street over here. I was rich, to me.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: He didn't want to do it at all.

JENNY ELISCU: It's unusual to hire a booker from a local club as a manager. It didn't feel at any point like they were trying to craft a path. I really believed them when they said, "We're just friends who want to play music together and we don't have any goals beyond that."

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: It was like, "Here's a guy who's a year or two older than us." It just reminds you of the Beatles' story. You meet all these managers and they're, like, fifty, and they feel like lawyers. Yes, of course, everyone wants to make money, I'm not saying we didn't, but money isn't as exciting as when a song is really good and you know it and you can feel it, it runs through the crowd, and you can record it well and you're on tour. That's more exciting than if they just said, "You made a million dollars!" We wanted someone who could sell us without us being there. That's what a manager is; they're selling you, but you're not there.

RYAN GENTLES: A lot of managers tried to manage them, and they wouldn't go with anybody. They said no to everybody; they wanted someone their age, who was up-and-coming like them.

NICK VALENSI: We were doing shows in New York as the Strokes. We had a bunch of songs that weren't on our first album. We did those for two years.

FABRIZIO MORETTI: There was a song called "In Her Prime." And a song called "This Life" that turned into "Trying Your Luck." Those songs started to feel crisper. Sharper and more metallic. Sleeker.

NICK VALENSI: Then one day at rehearsal, Julian had one song that we started playing, "The Modern Age." Suddenly it was like, "Whoa, we need more like this one. We should get rid of these other ones." The others were trying to be more musically complex, like Doors-y, with some baroque elements in there. "The Modern Age" was like, "Whoa, this feels like a Velvet Underground song." It was so cool and simple.

JAMES ENDEACOTT: That song just blew my mind.

NIKOLAI FRAITURE: My brother had given Julian *The Best of the Velvet Underground* at Christmas dinner one year. That's when we found another channel.

NICK VALENSI: It felt really full, even though there wasn't all that much going on. All the parts fit together like a puzzle. It came together so easily. He wrote it and we played it and it wasn't like we had to hammer away at it for a long time; it sounded right in an afternoon. Then they just started coming.

JULIAN CASABLANCAS: I was a big Velvet Underground/Lou Reed fan. People thought we sounded like Television because Television was a New York band influenced by the Velvet Underground. That's why we sounded like them, but that's not what we were listening to. I was listening to Lou Reed.

NICK VALENSI: "The Modern Age" wasn't the first *Is This It* song that was written, there were some before, but once "Modern Age" came up, it was like, "Yeah, we need to sound like this." Then "Last Nite" closely followed.

CARL SWANSON: The Strokes were trying to literally embody an idea, be part of a continuity.

AUSTIN SCAGGS: They were writing the autobiography of the East Village.

JOE LEVY: This all happened in a place where other things happened a long time ago. This was a block away from the St. Mark's church where Patti Smith and Lenny Kaye started what would be the Patti Smith Group. They started it there because that's where Jack Kerouac read and because at the time Patti lived down the street. And it wasn't by accident that she lived down the street on Tenth Street, because the whole Andy Warhol crowd used to live in the East Village and the Velvet Underground used to play on St. Mark's Place. All of this stuff doesn't happen by accident, it's not a coincidence. It's not a straight line either—you don't go, "Oh, Velvet Underground, Patti Smith, Karen O." It doesn't go Velvet Underground, Strokes. It's a long distance to travel from one to the other but there is a continuum, there is a vibe, there is a place where those bands have roots. It does matter, it matters to the sound.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: I remember when I knew. I remember it so clearly even though we were still so tiny. It was snowy and we were playing Luna Lounge. There were forty people, but it felt good, it

was a good forty. We played “Modern Age” and “Last Nite” for the first time. After that show it was like, “Yeah, we’re better than the other people who are playing.” I don’t even say that to be mean. You just felt the energy when we were playing those songs, like, “I wish I was seeing it and not playing it.”

J. P. BOWERSOCK: The first time I saw them was at Acme Underground.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: I had this Rickenbacker, like John Lennon’s Rickenbacker from Hamburg, short scale, that used certain strings. I was walking in the West Village to get strings, and I ran into this guy. He said, “I sell the strings that are on these guitars, they’re handmade in my apartment.” I was like, “Okay, this seems like I might get raped . . .” Nick or Fab or somebody came with me. “Wait out here; if I’m not back in five minutes, something happened.” I went in his apartment. It was on Seventh between A and B. I got the strings and I said, “Do you know anyone who can fix guitars?” He was like, “Yeah, go to Richie’s Guitar Shop on Eleventh between A and B.” So I find Richie. I got my guitar and Nick’s guitar that we still use to this day at Richie’s. Then, who did I meet from Richie’s? J.P., who became Julian’s and my guitar teacher.

J. P. BOWERSOCK: This was back in the days where they were still super nervous. Julian puked before the show.

KIMYA DAWSON: Like me, Julian had paralyzing stage fright, so before every set, I just remember he would come up to me and be like, “Mama!” We would just hug.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: That’s always been an insecurity of mine—Nick is so good at guitar, and I’ve always been the second runner-up.

J. P. BOWERSOCK: Richie had two guys he recommended for guitar lessons. I was the below-Fourteenth Street guy and he had another guy for above Fourteenth Street.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: We called J.P. “the guru.”

J. P. BOWERSOCK: What Julian was mostly leaning on me for was that he wanted every note planned out, nothing left to chance. They were one of the first bands I knew that practiced in their rehearsals to a click, and not only once a week but four or five nights a week. They were deadly serious about being super tight, so every note

had to be worked out. Julian wanted to work out every note of the guitar solos too. After the lessons we would just get a six-pack and hang out.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: Julian and I bought a car for five hundred dollars that we called Steven. It was a 1984 Gran Torino, orange on the inside, black on the outside. We never got insurance, we never got plates. One time we all took Steven out to this house Nick's mom had rented on the beach. We stayed up all night drinking beers and woke up the next day with all these bug bites. There were so many great nights like that.

RYAN ADAMS: Those guys always had cars. I was like, "Why do you have cars in the city?!" They always had cars.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: Ryan would always throw parties at his house after our shows.

RYAN GENTLES: I had a three-bedroom apartment. I lived with four dudes—Dennis from the Realistics was one of them.

DENNIS CAHLO: It was a one bedroom, on Second Avenue between Thirty-Third and Thirty-Fourth. I walk past it and still get shudders.

ADAM GREEN: It used to be a bordello right before Ryan moved in. So johns would still buzz the door.

DENNIS CAHLO: There was a bedroom right next to mine, a tiny piece-of-shit closet that was the sex room. Whoever went in there, it was "If this van's a-rockin', don't come a-knockin'"—that kind of thing.

ADAM GREEN: My first introduction to Julian was one night when there was a party at Ryan's house. I guess the Strokes had had a show that night and they ended up there. Julian came in really fucked up, took some girl into the bathroom and broke the shower.

DENNIS CAHLO: It was mayhem. You'd walk out at seven in the morning to make eggs and there would be piles of people on the floor. I'd be walking over them, screaming, "I have a job, man." Nick Valensi would be in the kitchen, still awake, saying, "I really admire your work ethic." And I'd go, "Fuck you. Get a job, asshole!"

MOBY: I became friends with the Strokes long before I saw them live. I was a drunk and they were drunks.

SARAH LEWITINN: Everyone knew Moby. I remember going to his house with Gideon for a Fourth of July party and Natalie Portman coming and she was making fun of him for using the word “rad.”

MOBY: I mainly knew Julian and Albert. Three A.M. in a basement somewhere, drunk, trying to find cocaine, doing cocaine in the bathroom with someone and talking about the Stooges. Being at Lit at six o’clock in the morning going, “You know what!? We should start a band!” It makes my teeth hurt just thinking about it.

JENNY ELISCU: Oh man, Lit . . .

SARAH LEWITINN: I once shared a bathroom with Hilary Duff at Lit and it was just one room and when I was too shy to pee in front of her she and her friends turned their backs and she sang the Smiths to me.

JENNY ELISCU: The place that if I ever would have died from doing heroin—it would have been at Lit.

JUSTINE D: Lit was basically like a catacomb outside of Rome. It had this feeling of . . . those were some of the most decadent nights. Everyone was there. It was the best fun. Especially in that basement back room. I mean, me being pretty square, I would walk back there, shake my head, and just walk out.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: Julian and I lived on Second Avenue between Eighteenth and Nineteenth, which was a perfect apartment for us, because we had two bathrooms; it was like a dumbbell. He had his own room and bathroom, hallway with a kitchen and washer and dryer, and I had my own room and bathroom. It was cheap, and it was fun. But we were so opposite; I was neat and organized, and my room was all nice. His room was just a mattress on the floor.

DENNIS CAHLO: That apartment was also disgusting.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: I remember one morning Julian came in, hung-over, and got in bed with me. It sounds like we slept together, but it wasn’t like that, we were nineteen years old. It came from a very pure, just natural place, when you feel completely comfortable with someone. I imagine everyone has had that in life, where they can take a shit or fart or just be themselves, be quiet in a room, while someone else is there, and feel like you’re alone. I never got

that comfortable, I don't think, living with someone else, even girlfriends.

CATHERINE PIERCE: Did Nick tell you the balls-in-the-mouth story? One of them passed out with their mouth open and they thought it would be hilarious to bet someone else that they wouldn't put their balls in that person's mouth. I think Albert put his balls in Nick's mouth. Albert loves to pull his balls out.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: Pulling my balls out at parties started because I heard that when Julian was younger he would do that.

CATHERINE PIERCE: Before parties I'd say, "Baby, my mom is going to be there, do not pull your balls out, okay?" We knew it was a fun party if his balls came out at some point.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: One night early on Fab and I had walked down from Thirty-Eighth and Eighth to Don Hill's, which was at Greenwich and Spring. We were drinking forties. We must have finished one or one and a half, and we were pretty drunk. So we got there and Fab and I were talking. This guy walks up and said, "I don't know who looks more like Syd Barrett, you or you." Fab was looking at him, and I turned around and was like, "My balls look like Syd Barrett," and I had my balls out. Fab was on the floor laughing and the guy just looked petrified and walked away. So ever since then, it could be at a really nice restaurant, it could be anywhere, I'd just be like, "Uh huh, uh huh, yes, I agree." Then you look away, and someone would notice that my balls were out. Obviously, it would happen more when you'd get drunk.

MARC SPITZ: They were such city kids. The first thing Julian said to me, he said, "Do you play pool?" I said, "Yeah." And he said, "You wanna play me?" And I said, "Yeah." And the first thing he said after that was "You're about to get fucked in the ass, my friend." And then he fucked me in the ass.

JIM MERLIS: The first time I met Fab they had just stolen a bunch of guitar picks from the shops at Forty-Eighth Street. We were at a photo shoot. Fab was dating this girl Cassandra at the time, and Cassandra got her coat stolen. So the whole time during this photo shoot, he was like, "Who steals a fucking coat, I can't believe

someone would steal a coat,” and I was like, “I can’t believe you don’t see the irony in this, you were stealing picks earlier today!” He’s like, “But, Jim, who steals a coat?” I was like, “Who steals guitar picks?! They’re a quarter!” It was like hanging out with a bunch of Holden Caulfields.

NICK VALENSI: At that time, I was working at a restaurant. Fab worked in a smoothie shop, Julian worked at a restaurant, Nikolai worked at a video store. Albert worked at Kim’s Video. We just had normal jobs. And we’d meet up at night and just smoke. We all smoked cigarettes at the time. We had that very small little rehearsal room in the music building on Eighth Avenue and Thirty-Eighth Street and we’d just stay in there all night and drink forties of Budweiser or Ballantine’s.

JULIAN CASABLANCAS: We would record three or four songs and then everyone in the band would be like, “Let’s put it out! Let’s go play!” And I was always, “No, this is not good enough, we should destroy this thing and start anew.” But, eventually, we had finished a demo and I did have this moment where I was like, “Oh wow, this could get us signed.”

GORDON RAPHAEL: I would always go to Luna Lounge to see bands and hang out with friends, and that’s where I first saw the Strokes. I was curious and I kinda liked something about them but I wasn’t really convinced. They looked like they were very proud of themselves and very stylish, but they didn’t have the musical aspects yet. Young Fab, the drummer—I think he was nineteen or twenty when I met him—every time he hit the drum it looked like he put his entire neck and back out. I thought he was going to break his spine in half, so I was watching him very closely, just waiting for an accident to happen.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: Someone told me about Gordon and I was like, “I’ll go check it out, I’ll go talk to him.” In a weird way I was always the business side to the band. I held the money because everyone trusted I wouldn’t spend it. So I met Gordon, I don’t remember how.

GORDON RAPHAEL: After the set, I gave them a little card I had made up and I got a call from Albert.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: I went to his studio and was like, “This is a cool vibe.” Then I told Julian to go meet him. That’s when we did the EP.

JASON GORDON: When I heard that EP I told everyone, “This is going to change New York music. This is going to put New York music back on the map again.” The energy in that EP, the rawness, the vocals, the attitude, the everything. I played that EP for everyone and I knew. I was like, “You will fall in love with this, you won’t be able to listen to it one time, you’ll be listening to it on repeat and then you will want to go see them live.” That was the feeling. Before that EP, New York music still felt like this small little tribe, and then all of a sudden here was this, like, band where you knew they can top the world. You felt like that about them.

MATT HICKEY: The Strokes actually sent us a three-song EP in the mail. We used to sit upstairs on Friday at the end of the day and go through the boxes and envelopes that people would send you and bring up some beers and roll a joint and just throw something on. “Oh, that’s bad. That’s bad.” The one that the Strokes sent in came with a note I will never forget. It said, “Hey, we’re the Strokes. We’re from New York. We used to play the Spiral”—which was the place across the street from the Mercury Lounge—“but it burned down, so I guess we’ve got to play the Mercury Lounge.” We thought it was a really great note.

RYAN GENTLES: I really wanted to help them, so I started sending the EP around. I said, “Give me fifty copies.” They didn’t. They gave me one. So I made fifty copies at the Mercury Lounge and started sending them out. The phone started ringing. “Who’s this band you sent me?” I knew I liked them, but I had no idea anyone else would give a fuck.

ALBERT HAMMOND JR.: We had small goals. Early on we were like, “We’re not going to tour, we’re going to make it in New York, what’s the point of going around and building up attention, having no one show up? You can be in the middle of nowhere and you have to get out of this small town. New York is a big town, so if we can make it here . . .”

RYAN GENTLES: It was Matt Hickey who said I should send it to Geoff at Rough Trade.

MATT HICKEY: We listened to those three songs that whole evening, over and over again. At that time I was just beginning to work as an A & R person for Rough Trade Records in the UK. Geoff Travis was smart enough to know that a guy who is booking twenty-eight bands a week in New York City is probably going to come across something.

GEOFF TRAVIS: Matt phoned up at about seven o'clock in the morning and played about ten seconds of the EP over the phone, and that was it. That was the moment.