

The Police vs. Will Shortz: My Own Personal Celebrity Death Match

I was just starting junior high and it was my first official party. Not a birthday party – but a ‘get together.’ Huge difference. Uncharted territory for a fringe dweller like myself. There was no music and we all sat around awkwardly. Just then, a girl walked in and staked out the room. She was wearing white lipstick, charcoaled eyeliner, and sporting that painful first attempt at blonde hair - which looks more like gold jewelry from the bowling alley vending machine than a perfect sun kissed blonde. I was officially in awe.

“Is there a record player?” She asked.

“Uh, yeah...over there,” I stammered, pointing at the dusty appliance.

She sniffed and proceeded on carrying a batch of records under her spindly arm. She pulled the first record off the top, flipped it around with precise, reverent movements. The black cover made the red symbols pop. I sipped my Hawaiian Punch and waited. The needle crackled and I heard that first drum intro and hyperkinetic off-beat rhythm.

I hated it.

Talking crazy shit about political revolution and spirits in the material world? I mean, at the time my favorite song was *Celebration* by Kool and the Gang. The first single I bought: *Reunited* by Peaches and Herb which just barely nosed out my second choice, *Elvira* by the Oakridge Boys. I was deep into easy, repetitive and hummable. I remember waiting patiently by the radio one whole afternoon, just so I could tape *On The Wings of Love* by Jefferey Osbourne for my own personal enjoyment. Needless to say, The Police were way over my head.

But several years and several thousand viewings of Bring on the Night later, I found myself following all the reunion rumors with a fervor of a lifelong fan. I monitored pre-sales. I checked web sites and scoured the internet for any buzz about when tickets were going on sale. The fateful day finally arrived and I proudly purchased tickets for the Las Vegas showing – why not add as much drama to the event as possible?

But, as I scoured the internet I became intrigued by another event. It was the polar opposite of The Police. Will Shortz, famed New York Times Crossword editor was appearing at Royce Hall at UCLA. He was going to do interactive puzzles! My heart skipped a beat.

My romance with the New York Times Crossword began, symbolically enough, on the Fourth of July. I had heard about Mondays. Even *I* could do them. So, I dipped my college drop-out toe into the deep waters of the New York Times Crossword. It was supposed to be a day like any other – friends and family gathering around a Southern California pool, sun burnt children allowing neon popsicles to drip down their knuckles. And me? I’m hunched over in the corner brooding, yelping out to the ether, “The Continental Army Encampment? In 1777-78? That’s the whole Valley Forge thing, right?” Counting the boxes obsessively, looking up into the heavens as I try to draw on some giant rolodex of bizarre information that I should know. I believe the term

everyone at the party was looking for was, “what’s an eleven letter word for someone who sits over in a corner doing a crossword?” P-a-r-t-y-p-o-o-p-e-r. Now, is that word part of a bigger crossword theme? It remains to be seen. Is it bathroom humor? Is it words that use some kind of defecation terminology to describe something dissimilar? The possibilities are endless.

I found myself feeling like I was somehow betraying the magnificence of The Police reunion tour by being excited about something so obviously...geeky. But there were going to be interactive puzzles, I muttered to myself. That junior high kid who waited adoringly by the radio for those first piano chords that soon led into the rocking guitar which marked the beginning of the Jeffrey Osborne classic was not so far in the past after all.

I think Peaches and Herb said it best, “Reunited...and it feels so good.”