

## INTRODUCTION.

*Most of this legend about a former country singer in a last-chance marriage, and of the riddle that he and his wife have left unsolved, comes from his friends and neighbors, both in Los Angeles and Berkeley, and the rest is from longtime Rolling Stone contributor Isaac Diehl, twice a Deems Taylor Award finalist in the 1980s, who spent four years trying to convince the magazine that a series of articles about a singer-songwriter on the downside of success belonged on its cover.*

*Diehl filled close to a hundred notepads in that time, and had you read them I think you'd have been swept up by the force of his obsession the same way I was—even while part of you wished you'd never begun. Like his subject, Diehl had been veering from the music business in search of . . . music. Which is an ironic quest, but also familiar. Every aging unsigned band, after all, tells a version of that story. And in the end, Diehl's decision to abandon his research to others (I was a non-music writer in the parking lot of a music awards banquet, a freaky torch passing; I was drunk but Diehl was drunker) made a certain sense as well. Not that anyone supposed he would really let his entire investment go. Because it's amazing how few renunciations that make inspiring sense in theory any of us ever dares to try.*

*The principal sources had reservations about cooperating with the project, but Diehl played on their vanity. Aside from which, he really seemed to like them. Nowhere in Diehl's body of work, much of which I've reread this past year, does he quite outgrow the idea that musicians and artists are a tribe apart—even now, when the most popular performers seem to have forgotten why a simple song once mattered. "They win at music like it's one more thing to win," he complained in an office email after being sent to profile a crop of pop divas fresh from American Idol. And when his editor replied, "Isaac, that's rock and roll," Diehl's parting shot sounded as juvenile and pedantic as maybe only music journalism can sound. "There are two histories of rock, Jann—the winner history and the outsider history. And you can keep your winner rock."*

*Yet it's clear that Diehl thought his protagonist would arrive at something more than sour grapes. He'd staked his hopes on the possibility of a wholesale redemption. Diehl's notes allude to "big universal questions," such as "whether good ends can be reached despite wrong choices . . . whether the things we most wish to reclaim in our lives might not be restored just by the sincerity of being mourned." At certain moments reading Diehl could get a little dangerous—his confessions bring you to the edge of exactly the sort of secret foolishness you've spent years either hiding from or saving for the right green moment of coming out. And while I'm not sure I ever abandoned myself to the writing as singlemindedly as Diehl would have, I was undeniably infected. The themes you spend your whole life feeling ashamed of and afraid of—those, for the record, are your life's work. But don't laugh at me or judge me by that standard. I just hope*

*there's enough honesty in my retelling to keep you reading through any poses and masks. Yours and mine.*

*I was also seduced by Diehl's understanding of Los Angeles--a landscape he describes as "always flickering between dreams and the bleached bones of dreamers"—along with his preoccupation with the concept of repentance. "By trying to atone for the unawareness of his youth," he writes in one early notepad, "country singer Harvey Kooper has been staking out the lessons and limits of his entire generation as the basis for the next." And I looked up from that spiral-bound page to think: Maybe this is a story for our times after all.*

*Or we could be making too much out of a minor musician (frankly, writing about anyone does that). And that's a shame—because if you can't keep country music simple, what's left? Any voice from Bakersfield or Modesto or the Lost Heartland could be as relevant as Harvey Kooper's. Think of your last high-school reunion, and the leveling effect of life and aging that takes hold afterwards, in the amplified glow of driving home: All the disappointments on display, all the misspent inheritances and head starts. . . as well as unexpected, mundane joys, sprouting like dandelions in somebody's garden of tragedy: Life goes on. But all this just seems to reinforce Diehl's point, and hints at the kind of liberation he must have glimpsed, himself, in pursuit of a country singer fleeing from his shadows. The folder of notes that Diehl unhanded in the parking lot of that awards banquet had been labeled "Book for a Drawer." --A. R.*