

Read an exclusive extract from
the opening chapter of *TOP 10 HITS*
the killer new novel by Peter Travers

TOP 10 HITS

A pop culture novel

Peter Travers

PETER TRAVERS PUBLISHING
www.petertravers.co.uk

No. 10

It's the final countdown
Europe

As far back as you can remember you always wanted to be a rock star.

It wasn't because you liked the idea of the fame and fortune, it wasn't because you wanted to have a long poodle perm and wear stone-washed denim, it wasn't because you wanted the glamour and girls, it wasn't because you'd written in your little yellow All About Me exercise book aged nine-years-old that 'one day I want to become a rock 'n' rolling star', and it wasn't because you wanted to play to thousands of adoring fans: it was simply because you loved rock music. Really loved it.

It was great bands like Led Zep, AC/DC and Guns N' Roses that lit a red-hot fire inside until... well, you'll get to that later... you just loved the hook of the huge monster riffs, the lull of the verse, the rise of the chorus that made everyone want to sing-along, and you really loved the solos that made you want to pick up a guitar and play it perfectly until each and every one of your fingers bled.

You struggled to play the guitar initially so you'd paid for some after school guitar lessons with your paper round money. For the first few months you could barely string a series of notes together and you got picked on at school for carrying your guitar bag on your back. But you stuck at it. Your tenacity and focus were strong even then. You remember your fingers ached as you held them in those funny positions as old Mr Parry drilled the basic chords into your head as you strummed and strummed your beloved guitar. Another year of school and extra lessons passed and finally you were slowly, painfully slowly, getting somewhere.

And then it clicked. You remember vividly because you'd been listening to *Sweet Child O' Mine* on your double cassette deck and

you were somehow able to mimic Slash's riffs on your Les Paul. After only a few more listens you'd even nailed most of the chorus. The solo took another week, and copying Axel's primal screams took a little longer, but eventually, gloriously, you got it.

When you left school and formed your band, The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly, you loved jamming with Jim and Steveo, trying to play your songs you'd spent days and nights dreaming up and writing down. You eventually got to play your first gig in a dirty local pub. You can still vaguely recall the smell of smoke in the air and stale booze on the floor, but you'll never forget your songs rocking out of the pub's knackered old speakers, and the sound of the clapping and cheering at the end of that night.

You were finally starting to feel like a rock star.

* * *

I don't really want to be here.

It's March and it's been a bitter, typical winter's day in Wales. Yet here, stood by the side of the stage in Cardiff's International Arena, I'm almost unbearably hot. It's a sell out Wednesday afternoon gig for the youth audience, but I'm sure the manager has let a bunch more in on the door to up his takings. I look back at the expectant faces as they all jostle for position in futile attempts to get a glimpse of the stage. Every now and then the cheers and screams get louder as they eagerly encourage the grand entrance of their so-called idols. I look at my watch. It's 3:40pm, still twenty minutes to go. We've already endured the solo 'celebrity' support act, Jimmy Fink, a sub-standard singer who's only claim to fame was coming third in *Pop Factory*. But the main act keep the crowd waiting. Probably because West Side need to preen their pretty boy faces and designer hairdos a few more times.

I'm glad I'm this side of the crowd as the hysteria steadily grows. There's nothing more damaging for your eardrums than piercing prepubescent screams. Actually, there is something worse, and that's the pop pap about to be sincerely – always sincerely – sung by the talent-free wonders due on stage.

As I said, I'm not exactly thrilled to be here.

I'm stood in the safety of the press area at the front of the stage along with a few other journalists and photographers milling about. I'm here reluctantly as my editor, Gary, felt it would be a good idea if I reported on West Side's Welsh gig for the next issue of our esteemed publication, *TOP 10 HITS*. He's getting his own back after I wrote that a prominent pop star called Princess is, in fact, a prince. My reliable source was Dan from *Guitar World* who works on the same

floor as us at Good Publishing Network. He told me she'd had a sex change ten years ago. I later found out he was just winding me up and we had to print a full page retraction and apology. We were told she especially didn't like the *'Princess and the Penis'* headline. I thought it was inspired.

So now Gary gives all the boy band and girl band live reviews to me. I normally try and get more of the indie and rock gigs to write up, as long as the song or album has made it up somewhere near the top ten. A task that can be difficult for any proper and passionate musical-instrument-playing bands. The top ten seems to get filled up with painfully wet soulless soul, lame rock-lite groups, R&B (ironic that it's called that these days, when there's no rhythm or blues in the modern R&B, only disjointed drum beats and good looking guys and girls rapping and posing), regurgitated and mindless dance tunes, and the recent flop idol or pop 'talent' show winners/losers.

The crowd continues to cheer and jeer not-so-patiently for the four bum boys to make an entrance. At least it gives me the chance to scan the press pit for Sophie, a pretty pop photographer I met a couple of weeks ago. I have a good look around but instead I can only see Fat Pat grinning as he comes towards me.

"Alright Hardy, how's it hanging my son?" says Fat Pat as he smacks me on the shoulder. Fat Pat is a freelance writer for various tabloids, he's also a good friend and we go way back. Sweat's trying to escape from every one of his pores.

"Pat you twat." I say, genuinely surprised to see his fat, friendly face over in Wales. "What are you doing this side of the Severn Bridge!?"

"About to ask you same fucking question Hardy," he says, London accent still intact. He's wearing a Sex Pistols T-shirt that hugs his generous belly tightly.

"Yeah, I got the short straw again as Gary's still pissed off with me," I say.

"Because of that Princess and her penis story fiasco?" laughs Fat Pat.

"Yep."

"Oh well. So how is *TOP 10* going these days?" asks Fat Pat.

TOP 10 HITS is a fun little, fortnightly 'music' magazine aimed squarely at the teen girl and boy demographic, reacting as quickly as possible to the latest musical fad or scene that's being listened to in playgrounds – even though our editor thinks forty per cent of our readers are older university students. Bless the poor, deluded fool. But Good Publishing Network is based in Bath, not London like all the big mags and daily papers, and that has it's good and bad sides.

What can I say? It's a job. It keeps me mostly out of mischief.

"It's top," I say flatly. "Mag sales could be a lot better."

"When're you going to become a journalist on a real music mag in the capital then Hardy?" says Fat Pat. This is one of the bad sides, the London lot think we're a farmyard outfit working out of barns in the countryside. But our readers don't care where we're based, as long as we keep banging out the same brightly coloured covers with photos of cute pop stars or starlets, they keep on buying our silly little magazine.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm working on it. *Q* and *Mojo* have my CV. Just waiting for the right reviews or features ed job to crop up," I say.

"Haven't heard anything back recently then?" asks Fat Pat.

"No, bugger all." Probably as I haven't actually sent them my CV.

"You should move up to London anyway. It's where it's at," says Fat Pat.

"I like the West Country. I like Bath, and Bristol's only next door."

"Too scared to join the rat race are you?"

"If you win the race, Pat, you're still a rat," I say.

We both turn to survey the crowd. A podgy teen girl with pink streaks in her hair and even pinker cheeks faints at the front. A burly security guard stretches over the barrier and picks her up not-all-that-delicately out of the crowd and carries her off to the first aid area. A gaggle of smiling mums and a few bored dads are in the background while infants through to teens bop about. I'm sure some of the kids are too tiny to be at a gig like this. It's like a school disco times fifty.

I finally spot Sophie. She's got a red cap on, but I spy the unmistakable pony tail of brunette hair peaking out through the back of her hat. Her mane shines as it flickers in the spotlights.

I feel myself stirring downstairs. No, I don't mean I physically feel myself down my trousers. Or that I'm downstairs stirring some soup on the boil. More that I *sense* myself rousing from a slumber. I smile, and my throat goes dry. Sophie did that to me last time.

She's stood away from the other photographers, off to the left of the stage, intent on getting a different shot to the others probably.

I make my excuses with Fat Pat and move around the press pit so I can still see the stage, while being able to sneak a side profile view of Sophie. Her strong feminine cheekbones glow under the stage lights. She tucks a few strands of hair behind her ears as she plays with her camera lens. She's got a tight little black Foo Fighters T-shirt on that shows off her breasts while a pair of fitted jeans hug her arse for all they're worth. Lucky Diesels.

I almost forget we're waiting for those pretty little posers to come on stage until the sweaty, young crowd go into another screaming-as-

loud-as-they-can phase. God, how late is fashionably late these days anyway? Is it even fashionable to be late anymore?

And, more importantly, what excuse shall I use to talk to Sophie?

* * *

As you jog along the side of the River Taff you smile to yourself. It's nice to be jogging for a purpose rather than jogging for ten miles from point-to-point with a 30kg Burgan on your back and a compass in your hand. You cross the river and pick up your pace a little from Castle Street down to the High Street. Welsh patriotism hangs in shop windows in the shape of flags and red dragon emblems. You watch the aimless, gormless shoppers wandering from window to window like a human railway line, shuffling from shop to shop, regardless of what's for sale. You continue jogging into St Mary Street, then turn left on to Caroline Street. You're breathing deeply and as you exhale a stream of vapour appears in the cold afternoon air. But you're not out of breath. You want to act the part and look like a real jogger, a slightly unfit one as you'd decided. You take a sip of water from the tube poking out from your CamelBak on your back then cross the junction to Bridge Street, and on to Mary Ann Street and destination X.

You trot down Mary Ann Street to find a few stragglers hanging around the side of the Cardiff International Arena. A lone tout is attempting to flog his last handful of black-market tickets. You wipe the sweat from your brow and, at the same time, surreptitiously check your black haired wig is still in place. It hasn't moved since you carefully glued it in place two hours ago. It felt weird when you first tried it on and looked in the mirror. The straight hair tickled your ears unlike your closely cropped crew cut, but anybody who meets you today wouldn't know you any different, and when you'd done a quick trial run down the local shops you didn't get any funny looks. That gave you extra confidence.

As you round the corner to find the Arena's main entrance, you clock a handful of small, medium and overweight security guards. Just as you'd predicted. You continue past them and jog around the back to the fire exit. You'd disabled the alarm on the door the night before with a simple bit of rewiring, plus you already know there's no CCTV covering this door. Even so, you lean against a wall and do a few mock jogger stretches. After checking nobody from security's followed you around the back, you use the metal ruler from your CamelBak to slide between the lock to ease the door open, and slip quietly inside. You check your watch. It's 3:40pm. Bang on schedule. The support act will be clear of the stage by now

and you have twenty minutes to get in, setup before the boy band hits the stage, and get out.

You can hear the screams of the anticipation from the crowd as you saunter down a long, empty corridor. You quickly find the cleaning cupboard you're after and nip inside. The smell of cleaning products inside the cupboard is almost overwhelming. You slide the CamelBak off your back, get out the black security guard shirt and ID badge you've had knocking around the flat and adapted the night before, and swap it with your white jogging top. You keep your black jogging bottoms and black trainers on. With the security shirt on you're reminded of those long, teeth-grindingly boring hours spent staring at ranks of CCTV screens through the night in a tiny office in a basement. Those tedious rounds of the empty office floors without seeing a soul the whole night. It won't be that boring today. Using a cloth you've brought, you carefully put a small, homemade black box in your pocket without getting your fingerprints over it. You stash the CamelBak behind some floor cleaner and get yourself into security mode as you head into the corridor and towards backstage.

The temperature rises the closer you get to the stage. Riggers and roadies are hanging around corridors looking busy but nobody gives you a second glance as you stride past to stand by the side of the stage. You'd already checked the roadies working today would be a mixture of local labourers as well as the touring party – otherwise a close-knit crew might spot you as an impostor. Security men wander around with the same black shirt and ID badge as yours. You're proud of your attention to detail. You move along by the side of the stage. You're almost in position now.

For the last four months you've been meticulously planning this moment. You've started taking less security shifts and bodyguard work to dedicate time to your little pop project. You're dipping into the money you'd saved when you did your long and enjoyable tour of duty in The Gulf. You were going to use it to buy a house one day, but you've decided this is a much more worthy cause. You think back to Christmas when all around you people were at parties, getting boozed up and fat on turkey, and swapping presents, while you were indoors, planning and setting up your Top 10.

Your Top 10 Hit List.

You smirk when you remember how those two blokes back in the pub in Liverpool last November inspired your killer idea.

Killer idea, indeed.

You stroke your wig and pad down a strand of hair by your ear as if it was your own. From the left-hand side of the stage you take in its sheer size as the lights flash around and out and over the crowd. The kids' cheering goes loud to quiet as you peer around the corner to

check them out. So that's what a proper-sized crowd looks like from a proper-sized stage. You didn't get that sort of crowd when The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly played down the local juicer. You nearly let yourself dwell in the moment but you're quick to stay focused.

You look across the stage. Roadies stroll back and forth, a couple of them carry out final sound checks. As they're finishing up you check your watch. 3:53pm. You realise it's now or never.

* * *

Like the kindergarten crowd, even I'm getting restless now. These little pop tarts better get on stage soon or I will just piss off to the pub and write my review from there. It'll be the same songs and the same show with the same 'fabulous' light display as every other gig West Side's played throughout the UK so far. The crowd show their boredom too as the rise and fall of their cheers get further apart.

To be honest, the only reason I've stuck around is because of Sophie. She is still diligently taking aim, ready to fire off a few rounds as soon as the band take to the stage. I think of what I'm going to say to her. But, after mulling over some lame chat-up lines, I decide I'm not going to walk over and reel off any pre-planned spiel. No, Sophie deserves better than that. I'm just going to go over and have a quick chat. Just say hello. Just be myself.

"Hello," I say when I reach Sophie's side. After feeling like a nervy school boy, I feel strangely relaxed.

"Hi," says Sophie. She looks up briefly, before returning to carefully cleaning the lens of her camera.

"We met at the West Side gig in Birmingham, I'm Hardy," I say, "from *TOP 10 HITS* magazine."

"I know, I remember you," says Sophie. "You were very drunk." She doesn't take her eyes off her camera.

"There was a big free bar, and I was very bored," I say a little sheepishly.

"Know how you feel. I've been bloody commissioned to photograph every bloody West Side gig for their official UK bloody tour book. I've been bored for weeks."

"Christ!" I say, "and I thought I had it bad being sent to review three of their UK gigs."

"Think yourself lucky, Hardy."

She looks up at me for the first time, peering underneath the peak of her cap, smiling as she says my name. I notice her dark brown eyes as the stage lights flicker overhead. I also notice how tall she is. She must be around 5ft 8in as she still has to look up

at me. I like her height. It's a nice height. A very nice height. Not too short, not too tall.

"I guess I am lucky if you look at it like that," I say, "That's twenty-odd gigs isn't it?"

"Twenty bloody four," she says.

I melt when she says 'bloody' in her clipped, oh-so English accent.

Suddenly the lights change colour as rays of white, orange and green shoot down and around the stage. West Side's intro music booms from the stage speakers. The crowd are quick to react and release a tidal wave of cheers and screams. It's deafening. This means Sophie and I have to do that lovely, intimate act people do at concerts of getting closer to talk in each other's ears.

"Well, you look like you're enjoying yourself, I've seen how thorough you are at setting up your shots," I say into her pretty little ear. I can smell a sweet concoction of perfume and shampoo.

"I like to be professional whoever I'm shooting," she shouts in my ear, the heat from her breath warming the inside. It feels lovely. I'm glad I slapped on some Boss aftershave this morning now.

"But doesn't the music do your nut in after a while?" I shout in her ear.

"It did my brain in before the first gig. I bloody hate the shite West Side are churning out," she laughs loudly, putting her hand on my shoulder to get closer. I think I almost feel her nose brush up on my neck and behind my ear. Is she *smelling* me?

"So what music *do* you like then?" I shout in her shell-like.

She thrusts her bust out to proudly show off her Foo Fighters T-shirt, pointing at her chest just in case I didn't gather that she's a fan of Dave Grohl's rock lot.

Then Sophie does something to make me fall in love with her.

To emphasize her music of choice Sophie lets her camera hang around her neck and does a full-on air guitar solo. Screwing her face up and contorting her body. Oh shit. I'm in trouble now. Even her air guitar turns me on.

"I like rock music, of course!" she shouts, unleashing a gleaming smile.

* * *

You look across the stage now dowsed in coloured light and a surge of adrenalin rushes through your veins. You take a deep breath and stroll nonchalantly up on stage. You head to the mixer junction station at the rear of the stage where it's dark, and swiftly unplug the middle mic's cable and plug it into the little black box you had in your pocket, plugging the other end of your box into the junction

station. You're careful not to leave fingerprints on the box, holding it with the cloth from your pocket.

You learned a lot about electrics from setting up your own PA systems for countless gigs back in the day. Your little box of tricks switches the wiring so the earth of the microphone is actually connected to the live socket on the mixer. It also disconnects the real live wire and neutral to avoid blowing the circuit. The roadies are too wrapped up in their own role or ogling the crowd to care what you're doing. You quickly get off stage, but as you look towards the press pit, a female photographer in a red cap takes a picture of the stage. You think about quickly knocking her out and nicking her camera... but then you realise she's just testing the light and composing shots before the boy band come on stage. You keep your cool and slip into the darkness backstage, into a corner away from everyone else.

A voice on the PA says, "Ladies and gentlemen, mums and dads, boys and girls, please give it up... for West Side!" The crowd goes hysterical.

Mums? Boys? Girls? This is why these fuckwits are able to sell records. It's the under-developed, under-educated ears of the youngsters and housewives who know no better than to buy it.

From where you're standing you get a rear view of five boys in bright blue suits bouncing on stage. The two on the outside grab their microphones and start shouting, "Come on Cardiff, come on Cardiff!" as some mindless dance beat booms from the giant speakers. All five jump straight into an energetic dance routine. Just when you think the crowd can't scream any louder, they go nuclear. You can't believe the entire first 'song' has no lyrics, just a load of dancers prancing about. Jesus Christ. They're not even natural dancers, they look like a bunch of fat kids at a youth club party.

You've already justified why you've created a Top 10 Hit List. The music scene and pop charts need purging. And there's no better example of manufactured music than West Side and their formulaic ballads and constant crappy cover versions – that are *never* an improvement on the originals. Not one of the five arse bandits in the 'band' can write a song, read music or play an instrument. It's glorified, glossy karaoke.

For them, it's not about making music, it's about making money.

You've singled out Dazza because he's the celebrity-obsessed, gobby, egotistical, deluded wanker who thinks he's some kind of modern-day, British Sinatra. He's not got an ounce of talent compared to Ole Blue Eyes. So when they come on stage and just shuffle and jump about, you justify to yourself what's going to happen a little bit more.

West Side stop dancing.

The music stops.
The lights go down.
The crowd go mental.

In the darkness five roadies quickly line up five stools and five mics in a row and sprint off stage. A spotlight is switched on to the central mic and stool. Dazza, the slightly overweight one with the ridiculous spiky hair, walks in to the light. As his face moves into the spotlight, he sweeps his hair back from his glistening face and releases a cocky smile for the crowd. Still breathing hard from dance routine, he leans into the mic and wraps both of his sweaty hands around it, theatrically preparing to begin one of their big ballads. Thankfully he doesn't get that far. He doesn't even get to sing a note: 240 volts raging through his blue-suited body put a stop to that.

You've seen someone get electrocuted by direct current when you were in the Gulf so you know the whole body goes into spasm, and all their muscles contract making it impossible to let go of whatever they've inadvertently grabbed hold of. Yet it's actually the amps that are bad for the body, not all those volts. So you were careful to make sure your little black box pushes 250 milliamps through the cable, enough to shock an elephant. The live current is making Dazza vibrate on the spot.

It certainly gives a new meaning to appearing 'Live On Stage'.

The crowd love it. They think Dazza's jerking around on purpose. They think he's still *dancing*. As demented body popping goes it's pretty impressive. His band mates aren't quite so happy to see their mate violently convulsing and a couple of them shout at roadies to shut the power down.

A skinny roadie rushes past you to the main mixing desk and shuts down the power to the mics. Dazza finally lets go of the mic and drops to the floor in an awkward, podgy heap. One of his arms flops out with his hand facing the ceiling. You can just make out the electrical burn marks on his palm. As he lies motionless, the crowd's screams of joy slowly but surely transform into screams of terror as one by one they realise what's happened. Chaos spreads through the crowd. They don't know whether to run, or stand and stare. Some mums drag their kids away, others shield their own eyes. Roadies dash from one side of the stage to the other, while the four remaining band members are dragged off stage, presumably for their own safety. Amazingly the spotlight stays on Dazza.

Security starts ushering the shocked crowd out and eventually a paramedic runs on stage and gets to his knees to check for a pulse. He rolls Dazza over on his side, clears his air way, then rolls him on his back and starts carrying out CPR. After five futile minutes he

stops. A small collection of roadies circle around Dazza and the paramedic. You move closer to the stage to see the paramedic's reaction. He looks up to a man, West Side's manager probably, wearing a white shirt and black tie. The paramedic looks apologetic as he shakes his head. Cardiac arrest. A shudder runs down your spine and you ease backwards.

As you slip off towards the corridor, you see the red-capped photographer in the press pit again. She looks uneasy and unsure whether to take a picture of dead Dazza. Business-sense takes over and she quickly fires off a succession of shots before being escorted out of the press pit. That's it girl. You wouldn't want your first hit, your No.10, not to make it into the media.

While the chaos continues, and the crowds frenetically disperse among panicking roadies and security, you take the opportunity to slip unnoticed back to the corridor and cleaning cupboard. You quickly change back into the jogger's outfit, stash the security stuff into your CamelBak, and you're back out the fire exit and into the late afternoon sun in less than two minutes.

After the intense heat by the stage, the cold air feels freezing as you inhale a lungful, but as you casually break into a jog and leave the shocked crowds coming out and looking lost in the street, you can't stop grinning. "You've done it," you say quietly under your breath. "You've fucking done it."

Your Top 10 countdown has begun. One hit down, nine to go.

Find out who's next on the Hitman's Hit List, and read how Hardy and Sophie get caught up in all the music, murder and mayhem by going to www.petertravers.co.uk to pre-order your copy of TOP 10 HITS.