

HALL BROTHERS ENTERTAINMENT PRESENTS FLAG DAY 2011

Take Me Out

By A.C. Hall

Ian Murphy focused on his breathing, trying to block out the roar of the crowd. He stood in the shade of the tunnel, but the bright green grass of the baseball field was visible just a few feet away. Ian had taken few singing engagements since retiring from his successful career as a recording artist, but this one had combined his two favorite things in the world; Baseball and America.

Being asked to sing the national anthem at the local teams first home game was an honor that Ian took very seriously. A lifetime supporter of the Dewsville Eagles, Ian couldn't wait to help open up their season. He was even more excited to honor the flag of the United States of America, the country he loved dearly.

A stadium worker motioned to Ian, and he walked down the tunnel and out onto the field. The crowd went wild. Unlike most recording artists, Ian had quit while he was still on top. The way he figured it, he had more money than he could ever spend, had touched hundreds of millions of lives, and had left his mark on popular music forever. Retiring at forty was called crazy by some, but Ian was enjoying his life. Fans still inundated him with requests for a new album, and agents and record labels made it a daily task to remind him of all the money he could be making if he went back into the studio, but he ignored all of them. This was all that mattered to him right now in his life. Baseball and America.

As was his ritual, he closed his eyes before stepping up to the microphone. He always delivered the first few lines of any song with his eyes closed.

“Oh say can you see?” Ian began.

Despite not singing regularly anymore his voice was still as golden as ever.

“By the dawn's early light.”

He opened his eyes and scanned the center field wall, wanting to focus on the glorious stars and stripes that flew there as he continued the song. Ian faltered. The flag pole was there, the same place it always was, but the massive American flag that usually hung from it was gone.

A murmur rose up from the crowd as they wondered why the song had stopped. The stadium employee leaned towards Ian.

“Is there a problem Mr. Murphy?”

Ian pointed at the flagpole.

“Where's the flag?” he asked.

The stadium employee studied the flagpole for a moment, then furrowed his brow.

“Uh...,” he stammered.

The man pulled a walkie-talkie from his pocket.

“Where's the flag?” the employee asked.

Chatter broke out over the radio and within thirty seconds it became evident that nobody knew where the flag was. The head groundskeeper confirmed that the flag had been there during batting practice, just an hour and a half ago.

The crowd was growing restless and so were the stadium employees. Ian stepped away from the microphone and looked around, wondering what he should do.

“Mr. Murphy,” the stadium employee said, “maybe you could sing without the flag?”

Ian shot the man a stern look.

“With all due respect, I'm not singing until we find that flag.”

The man again spoke into the walkie-talkie. A few rowdy fans were booing now.

“Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please,” the public address system roared to life. “The whereabouts of the American flag is not currently known at this time.”

Ian heard snickering and turned towards it quickly, irked over the idea that someone would be laughing about this. He scanned the first few rows of fans above the visiting teams dugout but saw no one laughing. His gaze lowered and he saw that it wasn't fans laughing, it was the opposing players.

The team was the Baytown Bombers and this was their first year in the league. Even before they took the field for the first time they were already making people angry. Owned by a high flying rapper who openly bragged about making his fortune from dealing dope, the Bombers were a team made up of some of the

nastiest individuals baseball had ever seen. They were boastful, rude, crude, and ready to bend every rule they could.

The more the players laughed, the angrier Ian became, and before he knew what he was doing he was halfway to their dugout. They saw him coming, but instead of quieting down they laughed harder. Ian stopped at the opening to the dugout and glared down at the players and coaches inside.

“Something I can help you with old man?” a dirty faced player asked.

Ian studied the young man. He looked like he was fresh off the farm, a small town boy with a mean streak big enough to land him on a team like the Bombers.

“You think disrespecting the American flag is funny?” Ian asked.

“We don't know nuthin' bout hidin' the flag,” a different player said.

Ian looked at this man. He smiled wide, revealing a mouth full of golden teeth with diamonds set into them. Several of the players laughed and Ian's heart started pounding. Could these men have done something to the flag? From the way they were leering at him, it didn't seem too far fetched. He looked at each of them, trying to figure if he was overreacting or if the Bombers were involved.

And then he saw it.

“No,” Ian muttered.

He took a faltering step backwards.

“No,” he repeated.

The players realized what he had seen and smiled even wider.

“That's right, punk, what of it?” one of them taunted.

In several different places on the dugout wall the Bombers were proudly displaying the insignia of the group known as EDAR, End Democracy/Anarchy Rising. The group was getting a moderate amount of media attention, mostly because a few high profile celebrities had mentioned their support for the group. Ian was sick at his stomach anytime he heard about the group. They wanted to bring about the downfall of America, the land he loved so deeply, and represented everything that was wrong in the world.

“You'll never see your precious flag again,” a different player taunted.

Ian wasn't a man of short temper, but when someone disrespected America all bets were off. He dove into the dugout, lunging for the player that had mouthed off to him. The players weren't expecting it and Ian crashed into the young man and

drove him hard into the dugout wall. The player slumped to the ground but before Ian could make another move four Bombers players leapt onto him.

For a man in his forties, Ian was in very good shape, but he was struggling to keep his feet with the men clinging onto him. He felt himself falling, so decided to fall as hard as he could in an attempt to shake loose some of his attackers. They all slammed into the concrete floor of the dugout and Ian felt the grip of the players weaken. He pulled himself up as quickly as he could.

Another player was rushing towards him and Ian set his feet. Had it been anyone other than the player with the gold teeth he would've turned and run, but he simply couldn't miss out on an attempt to punch this young man in the face. The player smirked as he came in with a punch, thinking he was going to knock out the famous recording artist. If only he knew that one of the ways Ian passed the time now that he was retired was through weekly boxing lessons. His fist extended in a flash, catching the player right on the chin. The player's eyes rolled up in his head and he fell face first to the ground.

Now the Baytown Bombers were in a frenzy. They descended upon him and soon he was on the ground, mounting a desperate defense against the thunderstorm of kicks the players were raining down upon him. Not surprisingly, their cleats were sharper and longer than what was allowed by the baseball league. Ian gritted his teeth as they cut and dug into his body. He waved his arms, trying to keep his important areas covered.

“ENOUGH!”

The players responded immediately to the command. They parted as a shadowy figure emerged from the back of the dugout. Ian wiped blood and sweat from his brow, thankful for the respite in the attack.

“You picked a fight you can't win, old friend,” the voice said.

Ian sat up. The man walking slowly towards him wore the Baytown Bomber uniform, but he was no player. This was their manager, a man better known to Ian as “Black” Barry Anderson, the former lead singer for the doom metal band Then the Earth Shall Crumble. For a time, both Ian and Then the Earth Shall Crumble had been represented by the same promotion agency. Despite their very different musical styles, promoters had jumped at the chance to put the two acts on the same stage. The results had been disastrous, and Ian had come to have a true distaste for

“Black” Barry and his hard partying bandmates. The men had no respect for anything, least of all America.

“It's been a long time,” Barry said.

“Not long enough,” Ian countered.

The two men glared at one another for a long moment. Ian slowly started picking himself up off the ground, watching the Bomber players closely for any signs of another attack. They hurled curses and dirty looks, but none made a move. Ian got to his feet.

“Where's the flag at, Barry?” Ian asked.

Barry laughed. His demonic cackle had been featured in most of Then the Earth Shall Crumble's songs, and it still sent chills down Ian's spine.

“We're starting a collection,” Barry answered darkly. “On our off day we're going to have ourselves a big 'death to democracy' bonfire, and your precious flag is going to burn.”

Ian had to bite the inside of his mouth to keep from attacking. He wasn't sure he could withstand another stomping, but sitting idly by while someone talked bad about America went against all of his instincts.

“I want the flag back,” Ian said.

Barry laughed again.

“Give it a rest old friend.”

Ian was about to speak again but “Black” Barry held up his hand.

“It's been nice catching up but I have to go deliver the lineup to the umpire,” Barry said.

He turned away and walked up the steps and onto the field. Without any thought or hesitation, Ian rushed after him. Several of the Bombers reached for him but none could get a solid grip. Ian flew up the steps and then speared Barry in the back, tackling him to the grass.

“OH!” the crowd gasped in unison.

Ian pressed down with all of his weight, but Barry was wriggling wildly. He was able to slip free and threw a handful of grass into Ian's face. The distraction bought him enough time to get to his feet. Barry promptly kicked Ian hard in the side of the head. The crowd gasped again, horrified to see the beloved Ian Murphy getting pummeled but thrilled to be seeing a fight.

“Soon EDAR will rise up and crush your precious America beneath its spiked boot,” Barry said.

He kicked Ian again, this time right in the ribs. Ian rolled over onto his back as waves of pain shot through his body.

“We'll slaughter the fat cats and the goody two shoe's and anyone else who we don't approve of,” Barry yelled, looking like a crazed politician. “Chaos will reign supreme across the land!”

Another kick, and then another, and Ian was on the verge of passing out from the pain that was arcing through him. His vision went blurry and just as he was about to slip into unconsciousness a chant started up in the crowd. It was so loud that the walls shook.

“I-AN, MUR-PHY,” followed by CLAP, CLAP, CLAPCLAPCLAP.

It grew louder as everyone in the baseball park joined in.

“I-AN, MUR-PHY,” CLAP, CLAP, CLAPCLAPCLAP.

Their powerful chant fed directly into Ian. He felt energized by their support.

“It's time for this to end!” Barry said as he raised his foot to stomp on Ian's face.

He brought his cleat down hard, but Ian's hand shot up and caught his foot.

“No,” Ian said, “it's time to play ball!”

With his free hand Ian delivered a picture perfect uppercut right to Barry's crotch. The doom metal singer let out a girly squeal, his mascara traced eyes going wide. The crowd went wild. Ian got to his feet, all of the pain he had been feeling gone. The roar of the fans was all that he could feel now, and he felt like a prize fighter as he wound up for the knockout punch.

“AMERICA!!!!” Ian screamed as he brought his fist forward.

He could feel Barry's jawbone shatter beneath his hand. The man spun awkwardly in the air then crashed to the ground. The crowd exploded into cheers and the sound could be heard from miles away. The Dewsville Eagles players came streaking out of their dugout. They swept Ian up onto their shoulders and paraded him around the field to the delight of the crowd.

Local police and stadium security rushed into the Bombers dugout. They battered any player that got in their way, and a minute later two officers emerged back on the field with the missing American flag held proudly between them.

Three more officers joined them and they held up the stars and stripes as it billowed proudly in the wind.

Everyone in the stadium had the same idea at the same time.

“Oh say can you see,” they began in unison.

Tears filled Ian's eyes as his voice joined with fifty thousand others to honor America and its flag. Ian had performed thousands of times all across the world, but he had no doubt that singing this song on this day would go down as his proudest moment.

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