

I Ride Along With an OSHA Inspector

By Per Wiger

To an outsider the OSHA headquarters in Hollywood is unimpressive, a barely marked strip mall office squeezed between a dollar store and a sun bleached Orange Julius. Stephen was waiting for me on the curb so we didn't go inside, but he assured me it is a case study in underfunding and overwork.

I believed him based on the bags under his eyes and his beat-up brown jumpsuit. He carried a clipboard full of inspection sheets despite the ruggedized tablet strapped into one of his pockets. When I asked why he told me that the tablet synched with a system in D.C. but that the information never trickled down to his office, "Since the new regulations I've got to fill out all the paperwork twice." He shrugged, "Job's the job."

That quiet pragmatism has defined my relationship with Stephen.

"What's on the docket?" I asked him.

"Straight forward complaint call," he said, rummaging through his pockets for a velcro patch that says 'Pops Inspector' which he pressed over his left breast pocket. "Company comes in and says they need to step up sales so they import bits of tune from all over the charts and sort of engineer it together, source lyrics from the low bidder, retool the factory without retraining their staff - mostly undocumented of course - and start churning out singles. Next thing you know I'm getting bombarded with complaints; headaches and ear worm mostly, minor vision problems, that sort of thing."

Stephen directed me to the factory in question. It was a ways north of town which meant we had plenty of time to sit in traffic and talk.

"So this factory makes CDs?"

"No," he said. He has the salt-stained voice of a sea captain, "Common misconception, this factory manufactures music."

"I don't understand."

"It's simple, see music used to be made by individual artists - just like furniture or clothes. But that's not efficient see, the distributors need more regular hits. So they start mass

producing them. What you hear on the radio, most of the time it's this Ikea version of music. And that's fine, but too often these guys just want to cut corners."

We pulled off the highway and down an access road, Stephen had to flash his ID at two separate checkpoints. As we approached the factory the car began to vibrate, Stephen made a note on his checklist, "Excessive underscoring."

The foreman met us at the door with hard hats and a nervous smile. Stephen mostly ignored him as he assured us through the non-vital areas of the factory - offices, cafeteria, locker rooms.

When we finally got to the floor I was almost knocked off my feet. Raw music rolled down conveyor belts in the east wall; vocal track, guitar riffs, drum machine, hook. Each piece was fit and welded onto the song before it got spat out through the west wall. None of the workers had more than three seconds to complete their task. It was almost as overwhelming as the utter silence when Stephen slammed the emergency stop button.

"I've seen what I need to see," he told the foreman, "Send these poor bastards home, you'll get my report in the morning."

On the way back to town he broke it down for me, "Artist abuse is the highest charge, Ellie Goulding really deserves better than that trash. But that's just the tip of the iceberg. We've got dangerous, numbing repetition - that's huge, and so easy to avoid if you source lyrics that aren't padded for length, but it doesn't matter how good of a singer you are no one can sell something as inane as 'La- la- love me like you do,' even once, let alone twelve times, then the minor permutation, 'Ta- ta- touch me,' just makes it worse it causes numbness, mental anguish, ear strain... Compound the repetition with the essential hollowness of the lyric and it's frankly torture. And speaking of torture, the imagery? 'Every inch of your skin is a holy grail I want to find,' what does that even mean? Is her lover torn to pieces, scattered across the world? Is it implying that god has commanded her to find this person? But only their skin, which, again, is apparently hiding. I mean I could see it being a metaphor for her need to get this person naked but they could have phrased it literally any other way and it would have been more effective.

"There's forced rhyme, 'You're the fear, I don't care,' which is another nonsense phrase - but the rhyme scheme such as it is isn't even consistent, that line was plucked from another even

creepier song and the company has the audacity to force hard working men and women to make it fit thousands of times a day.” He shook his head, “They paid hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of dollars to put that song into production but none of that money was spent on making it safe to work on or to listen to.”

When I dropped him off he hesitated, “Look, I know you’re a busy guy. Freelance blogging is a million dollar industry these days, but you come back any time. If we could only bring to light what’s happening to these people…” He trailed off.

“I think we could really make a difference,” I said.

The sun was just starting to set, the whole world was golden, I turned on the radio.

“La- la- love me like you do, like you do…”

I turned it off.