

An American Band

By TibbieB

Dear Readers,

A summers ago, a group of S&H sibs and I met in the Great Smokey Mountains for a few days of watching episodes and sharing our obsession for the boys. While watching “The Specialist” late one night, we noticed Starsky was wearing a t-shirt with something printed on the front. Ever desperate for any minute detail about the private lives of our heroes, we pursued the clue with a fervor equal to Sherlock Holmes tracking down Dr. Moriarty. Thank God for that marvelous invention on the DVD player—the zoom! JackieH, always up to a challenge, maneuvered and manipulated the device until the words emblazoned on the t-shirt miraculously flashed on the screen before our eyes: “We’re An American Band.”

“I know what that is!” I shouted to the others. “Grand Funk Railroad! That’s one of Grand Funk’s biggest hits!” Who would have taken Starsky for a Grand Funk Railroad fan? He was a rocker—a hard rocker, no less! Until that moment, we had had little insight into his taste in music (aside from disco music, Jim Croce, and a little “Black Bean Soup”). We knew Starsky played the guitar, but had been treated to only a smattering of his musical ability in “The Avenger.” Could it be true? Starsky liked hardcore rock-and-roll?

We pontificated on this for hours and, on the following day, rushed into town in search of Grand Funk’s CD by the same title. It wasn’t easy, but we finally returned home from a hard day of shopping in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, Londonmaid proudly clutching the trophy in her hand. We ripped off the shrink-wrap, fired up the stereo, and popped in the CD.

A grand time was had by all as we prepared the evening meal, dancing around the cabin to the beat of Mark Farner’s hot guitar licks and the soul-pumping rhythm of Don Brewer’s awesome drumming. I’m sure we were quite a sight to any unsuspecting hikers or bears that happened to be lurking outside our cabin that night—a group of middle-aged female Starsky and Hutch fans, playing air guitar, belting out in unison, “We’re An American Band!” all the while basking in the knowledge that we were listening to “Starsky’s music.”

All this to explain that last summer’s memories inspired me to write this little ditty. There’s not much plot, only a smidgen of h/c, but a whole lot of fun at Starsky’s expense. I have since discovered that he wore the shirt in other episodes, such as “Vendetta.” I suppose you could call this a missing scene, but that’s a stretch of the imagination. Still, I hope you enjoy!

TibbieB

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Starsky leaned forward, pulled the pillow from behind his back, and awkwardly tried to plump it without disturbing his leg, propped uncomfortably on the coffee table. As he twisted to reposition the lump of foam rubber and fabric, he felt a pain shoot through his ankle right into his big toe.

“Damn!” he cursed, gritting his teeth, willing the throbbing to subside.

He eased back on the pillow, feeling genuinely sorry for himself, replaying for the third time in an hour the events that had landed him in this predicament. It was hard to believe he had only been in this miserable contraption for a week!

He stared down at the offending cast and tried to wiggle his swollen, black-and-blue big toe that peeked out from the clump of white plaster at the end. He felt the ache snaking right up to the core of his body. The doc had warned him to let the swelling go down before he tried to move around or put any weight on the leg. But, true to nature, Starsky hadn't listened. The day he was released from the hospital, he'd tried to hobble around the apartment on the cast without using crutches. He quickly realized his mistake and spent a miserable evening nursing the throb in his ankle. Then yesterday, he'd tried to prove to Hutch that he was mobile enough to go to the concert by foolishly demonstrating his agility with the crutches Hutch had rented from the hospital. It had hurt like hell when he boosted himself up on their padded arm supports and took three clumsy steps before stumbling and banging the cast against a chair. And now, today, his toes were more swollen than the day he broke his ankle! The pain had not been nearly as difficult to swallow as that “I told you so” look Hutch had given him when he lifted Starsky off the floor and helped him back to the sofa.

“It's out of the question, Starsk. If you had followed the doctor's orders and stayed off that foot a couple more days, the swelling might have gone down by now. You're in no condition to fight your way through a throng of teenagers, potheads, and over-zealous security personnel. I'm *not* driving you to that concert tomorrow night!”

“But, Hutch, you know what I had to do to get those tickets,” Starsky whined like a recalcitrant child. “Who knows when the band will come through Bay City again?”

“That's not the point,” Hutch countered. “The point is, if you aren't careful, the damage to your ankle could be permanent. You heard what the doctor said, same as I did. Now, accept the fact that you aren't going to the concert.”

Starsky looked up at him, knowing the battle was lost. Hutch was right. He would have to miss Grand Funk's one appearance in the entire state of California. Only the last-minute cancellation of their Sacramento date had rerouted them to Bay City in the first place. After this gig, they were scheduled to start their European tour and wouldn't be back in the States until next year. Rotten luck. That's all it was. Dirty, rotten luck.

He cocked his head to one side and gave Hutch a smile of resignation. “Take ’em,” he said quietly.

“Take what?” Hutch asked, confused.

“The tickets. They’re on my dresser,” Starsky said, nodding toward the bedroom.

Realization at what Starsky was offering suddenly filled Hutch’s eyes. “I can’t take your concert tickets, Starsk. It just doesn’t seem right.”

“Well, I bought one of them for you,” Starsky said. “It was a surprise. I mean, I know you’re not a big fan or anything, but I thought it would be fun, and maybe when you saw Grand Funk live, you’d get into their music.”

Touched by the gesture, Hutch smiled at him sadly. “That was really nice of you, partner. I don’t hate them or anything; their music just isn’t exactly my taste.”

“I know, I know. But it seems wrong to let the tickets go to waste after what happened and all.”

By now, Hutch knew the details of how Starsky had broken his ankle, and even though it was a weird story, he knew every bit of it was true. Only Starsky could be at the right place at the right time and still come out with the short end of the stick.



Starsky had arrived at The Coliseum before daylight, dressed in his jeans and tie-died t-shirt, hoping not to stand out in the crowd. He was bound and determined not to leave without two tickets to Grand Funk Railroad’s concert to be held next week. He sipped his coffee and watched as the line quickly grew. The box office wouldn’t open for another hour, but already, there were at least three hundred people ahead of him.

Starsky had taken some pretty heavy kidding from Hutch over his determination to attend the concert, but he didn’t mind. His solution was to buy Hutch a ticket, too, believing that once they got there, Hutch would see that these guys were every bit as talented as Buddy Holly or Jim Croce. It was just a different kind of music. They had the chemistry to rev up any audience! After all, Starsky had given ballet a chance, and had listened to jazz when Hutch insisted on playing those Dave Brubeck albums, hadn’t he? It was time Hutch expanded his horizons and tried a little hard rock!

The crowd was a mishmash of people, all ages, all races, dressed in every type of garb imaginable. Starsky’s concern about looking like a thirty-something cop was soon forgotten as he scanned the sea of faces—some with stylish haircuts and Afros, others still sporting the long styles of the Sixties. Obviously, the love of good rock-and-roll knew no boundaries, he decided.

Starsky turned and glanced at the guy standing behind him—a tall man about his own age, with the long legs of an athlete and the contrasting face of a soul that had aged too quickly. His puffy

eyes were rimmed red and his face was pocked with acne scars, detracting from what might have otherwise been a pleasant countenance. His soiled clothes clung to him like oversized rags, and his once dark hair now hung to his shoulders in dirty stands of gray and brown. He fidgeted, shifting from one foot to the other, his eyes nervously taking in the crowd around him. When they came to rest on Starsky, the man attempted a half-sincere smile and asked. “Got a smoke, buddy?”

“Sorry,” Starsky answered. “Gave ’em up in ’Nam.”

“No kiddin’? You were in that hell-hole, too?”

“Afraid so,” Starsky said, understanding now that the stranger was probably one more of the thousands of men whose lives had taken a wrong turn in the jungles of Vietnam and never found their way back.

“Man, if it hadn’t been for nicotine and pot, I would’ve never made it out of there alive,” the stranger said. “You, uh, you don’t have any grass on you, do ya?” he asked a little desperately.

“Don’t use that, either,” Starsky said, trying not to sound too self-righteous. He couldn’t help harboring a soft spot in his heart for fellow veterans who had succumbed to the comfort of drugs to survive the horrors of the war.

“Well, good for you,” said the stranger, without a hint of malice. “I guess some of us just need a little more help getting through the day than others.”

The loud clang of metal on metal signaled the raising of the ticket windows, and the crowd surged forward, splitting into three distinct lines as they reached the juncture where the security guards herded them toward one of the three windows.

Soon the bustling crowd slowed down to a natural rhythm as the lines began a regular pace, the customers buying their tickets and exiting through the turnstiles set up to keep them moving in one direction. It had been a long time since Starsky had bought concert tickets, and he couldn’t help thinking how much more organized things were than when he’d bought Led Zeppelin tickets a few years back. There had practically been a riot when the vendor announced they were sold out. He hoped he wouldn’t get caught in a scene like that again.

Starsky looked back at the man still standing behind him. “Name’s Dave,” Starsky said in a friendly voice, extending his hand to shake.

“Dennis,” the stranger responded, shaking Starsky’s hand.

“Look, Dennis, don’t take this the wrong way, okay? But if you need some help with a drug problem, I know a place—”

“Who said I have a drug problem?” Dennis said defensively. “Hell, I just asked if you had any grass on you, man. That doesn’t mean I’m a junky. Everybody knows the government’s gonna

legalize pot any day now! This is 1974, not the Dark Ages! So, keep your friendly advice to yourself, okay?”

Clearly insulted, the vet turned away from Starsky, abruptly ending any opportunity for further conversation.

Starsky wasn't surprised. That was the normal reaction from most Vietnam vets who were hooked on drugs. They felt indignant at being questioned about their need to rely on chemicals to forget what they had experienced over there. He'd seen it too often, lost too many friends as they evolved from marijuana to using stronger and more dangerous drugs, until, in many cases, they overdosed and died. Starsky didn't try to reopen the discussion. He knew it would be useless. And he'd never see this guy again—unless maybe one day, he was called to the scene of another overdosed junky and viewed Dennis's body lying in the gutter somewhere.

The crowd inched forward slowly, and eventually Starsky found himself in one of the three lines. Dennis split off into the line to his left. Starsky, his mind still focused on the vet and others he'd known like him, didn't strike up a conversation with anyone else. All he wanted now was to get his tickets and leave.

Finally, Starsky reached the ticket window. “The seating chart is on the wall behind me,” the clerk said, flashing him a saucy smile. Her gray eyes were large and bright as quicksilver, not yet dulled by the fatigue she would surely feel before the day ended. “Those seats that are still lit are available. The premium seats in the first ten rows are ten dollars each.”

Starsky scanned the large lighted seating board above her head, surprised to see there were still three seats available in row ten. This was his lucky day! He hadn't planned to spend that much for tickets. He'd figured about six bucks a piece—but, man, this was too good to pass up! At that distance, he'd be able to actually see Mark Farner twang out the lead on *We're An American Band*, or better yet, their classic 1970 hit, *Closer to Home*.

“I'll take Ten-C and Ten-D,” he said, quickly plopping his cash on the counter in front of her.

The young woman tore off the two tickets requested and slipped them across the counter to him, extinguishing the two lights on the seating chart. “Enjoy!” she said, flashing him another smile.

Starsky grinned back and asked, “Are you gonna be there?”

“Of course,” she told him. “In the front row. It's one of the perks of working here—first choice of seats.”

“Well, maybe we can hook up. I mean, if you aren't coming with a date or anything.”

Her eyes told him she was interested in the prospect. “Sounds like fun,” she said. “But I don't even know your name.”

“Stop! Stop that man! He just robbed me!” shouted the cashier in the booth to Starsky's left.

His head flew up just in time to see Dennis crashing through the crowd, shoving people out of the way as he went. The overweight, aging security guard closest to the ticket booth pulled a revolver and shouted, “Stop, or I’ll shoot!”

“No!” Starsky shouted, reaching the guard just in time to deflect the gun toward the ground. “You might hit somebody!” Realizing the guard was in no physical condition to chase anyone, Starsky yanked out his badge, flashed it at the guard and said, “I’ll get him. You call for back-up.”

Dennis had already disappeared into the crowd. Holding his badge above his head, Starsky dashed in the direction the thief had gone, and shouted, “Police officer, outta the way! Police officer, outta the way!”

Not stopping to consider he was chasing a robbery suspect unarmed, Starsky pursued Dennis, the crowd parting for him—some running for cover, others shouting and pointing in the direction the thief had taken. As the assailant turned and saw Starsky gaining on him, he cut through the coliseum entrance, into the arena area, and began zigzagging his way down between the seats. Clearly, Starsky was in better physical condition, and only the fact that the other man had had a head start prevented him from catching up.

Starsky cut through the coliseum too, gaining on the man by the second. “Stop! Police officer!” he shouted. Rather than slow him down, this seemed to spur the thief on. He steadily segued through the stadium seats, Starsky on his heels.

“Come on, give it up!” Starsky shouted. When Dennis turned and pointed a pistol in his direction, Starsky dove behind the nearest seat, just before the man squeezed off a shot that ricocheted off one of the metal bleachers.

“I don’t wanna hurt you, man. Just back off!” Dennis shouted. “I don’t wanna hurt nobody, but I got nothing to lose!”

Crouched behind the seat, it occurred to Starsky for the first time that he didn’t have a plan. He was chasing an armed felon, without his gun, and he didn’t even have a plan! He’d considered wearing the Smith & Wesson that morning, but was afraid someone in the crowd might notice it under his jacket and panic. Besides, he was off duty and had not expected to be chasing bad guys.

“Listen, Dennis, it isn’t worth it. Do you really want to do time for a few lousy bucks? Come on out now and give yourself up. I’ll get you some help,” Starsky cajoled.

“How many times do I have to tell you, I don’t want your help?! I just need a fix—that’s all. Now back off!”

“Can’t do that, man,” Starsky said. “You blew it, Dennis. Armed robbery is big league. Someone could’ve been killed. These things have a way of getting outta hand. Now put down the gun and come with me.”

In response, another bullet resounded against the metal of the bleacher before the assailant turned and fled down between the seats again. Starsky sprinted after him, moving with the speed and grace of a cheetah. He closed the distance so quickly that Dennis didn’t realize Starsky was on him until the cop sprung off one of the bleachers, tackling him and bringing him down hard against the concrete floor. The gun flew from the robber’s hand and skittered away, bouncing between the seats, coming to rest five rows below them.

As they hit the concrete, Starsky felt his ankle snap, the pain slicing through him like a dull blade. Not knowing where the gun was, Starsky tenaciously clung to the man. Dennis struggled, but was no match for Starsky’s strength. Too many years of drug abuse having taken its toll on his body, he was clearly outmatched. Starsky heard the sirens as the police cars sped into the coliseum parking lot.

Pinning the gunman beneath him, Starsky looked up to see three security guards heading toward them, their weapons trained on him and Dennis. “Hang on!” shouted the gray-haired man Starsky had intercepted earlier. “The police are on their way!”

Knowing it was over, Dennis stopped struggling and lay beneath Starsky’s weight, sobbing quietly. “I didn’t want to hurt nobody...I didn’t want to hurt nobody,” he kept mumbling, right up to the time the police led him away in cuffs.



Hutch pulled into the parking lot behind the emergency entrance of the hospital, his face pale and drawn. The call had come from a nurse in the emergency room, saying that his partner had been injured while stopping an armed robbery at The Coliseum. She’d told him little, except they were still evaluating the patient, and that Detective Starsky had listed Hutch as his next-of-kin in case of an emergency.

He slammed through the swinging doors, flipping open his badge and identifying himself as he reached the admission desk. “I’m Detective Hutchinson. My partner was brought in a little while ago. Detective Sergeant Dave Starsky. Can you tell me how he is? Can I see him?”

The nurse, a frazzled woman in her mid-thirties with over-bleached blonde hair looked up at him through large wire-rimmed glasses. “Let me check,” she said, skimming her finger down the list of recent admissions. “Yes, here he is. He’ll be going into surgery as soon as the surgeon arrives,” she assured him. “I think it would be okay if you went on in. I’m sure he’d like to see you before they come for him. Examining Room 3, down that hall—”

Hutch didn’t wait for her to finish. When he reached Room 3, Starsky was sitting propped up in the bed, his left leg in a temporary splint from his knee to the end of his toes. He looked up

serenely, his eyes foggy with pain medication. Behind him dangled two bottles of IV solution, dripping through the tubing into the needle in Starsky's arm.

"Hutch!" he said with surprise. "You came."

"Well, of course I came. They said you were hurt. How are you doing, buddy? No one's told me anything. Were you shot?"

"I'm fine," Starsky said with a goofy smile. "I broke my ankle, Hutch," he said, his speech slurring. "Chasing this guy who robbed one of the ticket windows. It sounded like a twig snappin'. The bone went right through the skin," he added, crinkling his face into a look of disgust.

"Ouch!" Hutch groaned sympathetically. "Bet that hurt." Realizing that the injuries were not life threatening, Hutch felt the knot of tension in his gut begin to relax.

"Yep. But not so much now," Starsky confided. "They gave me this shot." He began pulling the sheet away to expose his backside. "Talk about a big needle! I bet it left a hole. Wanna see?"

Hutch laughed as he reached out and stopped Starsky before he could pull up the corner of his gown. Obviously, the pain medication was working better than Starsky realized. "That's okay, pal. I believe you." He replaced the sheet and solicitously tucked it around Starsky.

"Ya shoulda seen it, Hutch. I jumped the dude from three rows away. It was kinda like flying, ya know?" A silly grin spread across Starsky's face as he relived the event through a kaleidoscope of drug-induced euphoria.

"I'm sure you were spectacular," Hutch agreed, patting him on the shoulder. "Now, why don't you just relax while I talk to the doctor and find out how long you'll have to stay here? When they release you, I'll come over and stay at your place a few days until you're on your feet again, okay?"

"Aw, Hutch," Starsky said, the corners of his mouth trembling with emotion. "You'd do that for me? You're a good partner, Hutch," he said, reaching out to cling to Hutch's forearm. "What did I do to deserve a partner like you, huh?"

His lips twitching humorously, Hutch struggled to sound serious. "I don't know, Starsk, I guess you're just lucky."



That had been eight days ago. The surgery had been complicated, requiring a steel rod be inserted into the ankle. The three days in the hospital had dragged by at a snail's pace. Then, true to his word, Hutch had taken Starsky home and moved in to play nursemaid.

Now, Starsky sat alone on the sofa, the effects of the pain medication long gone. Hutch had reluctantly accepted the two tickets and invited a date to go to the concert—only, he said, because Starsky would never let him hear the end of it if the tickets went to waste.

Starsky picked up the TV remote control and snapped it on, then scrolled through the channels mindlessly. It was almost 2:00 a.m., but sleep still eluded him. The throbbing in his ankle had subsided, but he still couldn't concentrate on the images that danced across the television screen. When he heard the front door opening, he glanced at his watch.

He waited only seconds before hearing Hutch behind him. "Still up?" came the familiar voice.

"Couldn't sleep," Starsky answered.

Hutch's brow wrinkled with concern. "Still having pain, buddy?" he asked, dropping into the chair next to the sofa.

"Not too much," Starsky answered. "So, how was it?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Actually, it was great. I really didn't expect to enjoy myself so much." Hutch dropped the keys on the coffee table and leaned back in his chair.

"I told you so," Starsky couldn't resist saying.

"Yeah, you did," Hutch admitted, smiling. "For once, you were right. Just don't go getting cocky over it."

Hutch leaned forward and laid a brightly colored t-shirt on Starsky's lap. "I, uh, I brought you this."

Starsky stared down at the shirt for a moment before unfolding it and holding it up to the light. Splayed across the front were the words: "We're An American Band" along with a picture of the four musicians. Touched by the gesture, Starsky smiled. "Cool," he said. "Thanks, partner."

"You're welcome," Hutch answered, noting the look of disappointment that momentarily flickered in his friend's eyes. "You know, Starsk, they're pretty nice guys."

Starsky's head snapped up. "You met them? You actually met the band?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. We went backstage after the concert and introduced ourselves."

"How'd you manage to pull that one off?" Starsky asked, amazed at this latest turn of events.

"I showed them my badge and told the security guys I was the partner of the cop who stopped the robbery a few days ago."

Starsky snorted at Hutch's audacity. "And that worked?"

"You bet it did. You're a hero, Starsk. You brought that guy down without a single bystander being hurt. In a crowd that size, it's a miracle someone wasn't accidentally shot. When I told Mark that you took off after the guy unarmed, he was pretty impressed. I told him how much you'd wanted to attend the concert, so he gave me this to give you."

"Mark? As in 'Mark Farner'?" Starsky asked incredulously.

"Right. Mark Farner, the lead guitarist. He sent you this," Hutch repeated, extending his hand. "He used it tonight. Said it might make a nice souvenir."

Starsky looked down and saw a well-worn guitar pick resting in Hutch's palm. Etched on it in gold lettering was the single word: "Gretsch." His eyes widened with disbelief. "Are you serious?" Starsky asked, "He sent this to me?"

"Yep. He said, to his knowledge, you're the first homicide detective he's ever had as a fan. He also said they were grateful you stopped the robbery and that none of their other fans were hurt. I suspect the bad publicity wouldn't have been very good for their tour, either."

"This is terrific," Starsky said with awe, reverently lifting the pick, carefully handling it as if the object was made of bone china rather than plastic.

"The band sent the shirt, too. I was going to buy one from a vendor, but they insisted on sending this one to you."

A broad grin spread across Starsky's face.

"I'm really sorry you couldn't attend the concert, Starsk," Hutch said sincerely.

"That's okay," he answered. This hadn't turned out so bad, after all, Starsky thought, considering the t-shirt and the guitar pick. Then he looked up, realizing the best perk of all. With a twinkle in his eye, he pointed out, "It was worth it. I mean, how often do I get a chance to tell *you* 'I told you so'?"

The End