

ALONG THE BEACH

By Keith Fisher

It was shortly before 7 p.m. on Saturday evening. The giant Newlands rugby stadium in Cape Town held a capacity crowd usually seen only at major international rugby matches. The atmosphere was palpable. The steel and concrete structures reverberated to the powerful, pulsing sound system. The strobe lighting and laser beams darted from one corner of the grounds to the other like possessed fireballs.

"This is bloody awesome," one culture lover was heard to comment.

The tall man sat alone, uncomfortable amidst the escalating hysteria. He loved Nature, the mountains and the sea. The artificial, polluted environment sickened him. The cigarette smoke contaminated the air he was forced to breathe. He longed for the soft sounds of the night and the sweetness of the evening air of the lush wine lands and the distant Karoo.

Why am I here? He asked himself; then he remembered.

The crowd was waiting for the ultimate moment as the frenzy increased in raucous abandon. The giant television screens mounted on either side of the stage, burst into life giving the crowd a foretaste of what awaited them.

The image of their cult hero flashed before them on the screens as he swung into action with his latest pop hit: *'Gimme what I want!'*

Leslie Sean Donovan was on screen!

'Gimme what I want,' he sang in coarse, husky tones.

The tall man recalled memories of other times, distant places and lost souls. He closed his eyes and massaged his temples as if to expunge the scene before him. His head throbbed as he reached for a pill.

Mark Rolt held his head in his hands as he sat alone in his small apartment in Green Point, a modest suburb near the sea, not far from the city centre. Mark's boss, James Parkins, editor of the Cape Daily News, had remonstrated with him that afternoon.

"I don't know what the hell's got into you, Mark. A year ago you were one of my top reporters. I had you earmarked as the best I'd ever trained, but this latest stuff of yours is nothing better than a grade three kid's essay.

"It's dead, Mark, dead! No bloody substance. You're mixing fact with speculation. It's like a story you lifted from last week's knock-and-drop. It's just not good enough for the News and you damn well know it isn't. What the devil's going on? Can I help in any way?"

"I'm sorry, James. I can't seem to pull myself together since the divorce. It's been four months. I thought I'd be pleased to see the last of her."

Parkins knew about the break-up, but Mark would discuss it with no one.

"You've got some leave due, haven't you?" James asked.

"Yes, but I can't take it now. The parliamentary session starts soon and then all hell breaks loose. You know I can deliver the goods, James. I must just get out of this bloody black hole I'm in. Thanks for the offer, but I have to do this for myself."

LSD was performing as his millions of disciples worldwide expected and idolised. Their icon was one hundred and seventy-five centimetres tall and slightly built. His torso on the screen was adorned with a skimpy scarlet waistcoat, buckled at the navel with a rhinestone clasp that contrasted with his olive-hued, heavily textured skin. His chest boasted a diamond-shaped patch of curly black hair.

He wore revealing black satin tights and his feet were encapsulated in black kidskin ankle boots that revealed a touch of flesh between them and the cuffs of his tights.

Leslie Sean Donovan, better known as LSD, was the half-Greek, half-Irish son of his Roman Catholic father and Greek Orthodox mother. The offspring of this unusual union was blessed with the beauty of Adonis and the charm of the Blarney.

His curly, jet-black hair tucked around the nape of his neck and a lock fell across his brow. Brilliant violet eyes contrasted with his classic Grecian nose. Dark eyebrows; long, curved eyelashes; and a full sensual mouth completed the image. The cumulative effect that had captivated the youth of the world was quite extraordinary.

The personification of Mephistopheles, the silent one thought as he watched the prancing figure on stage.

The quiet man's physique contrasted sharply with that of LSD. He was one hundred and ninety-five centimetres tall, with a build that reflected his farming origins. He was muscular with cropped receding light brown hair, and was deeply tanned. His clothes were functional, mostly khaki twill. At 31, he was in good physical shape with a perfect tan; an asset to any rugby team.

Mark watched the rugby on TV and poured another beer. It was six on a Saturday afternoon. Unheard of! Mark Rolt sitting on his butt in his tiny apartment moping over his job and, worse still, drinking alone. He silenced roaring crowd with the press of a button.

"Where to now? I'm damned sick of this flat and the same routine every bloody day."

He drove slowly along the marine esplanade and stopped in front of a new bar restaurant.

"Looks okay."

He sat at a table looking onto the beach. A young couple sat at a corner table. They were lost in each other's eyes and certainly didn't notice him enter. The promenade outside was deserted.

Looks like a scene from '*On the Beach*', he thought.

The sham marriage and sordid divorce unfolded yet again in his mind. Everything had started so well. She had a good job as a fashion designer and most months earned more than his newspaper job brought in.

We were more besotted with each other than those two, he thought as he watched the couple in the corner. Mark ordered a beer.

"My God, Rhoda!"

She was lying on their bed in one of her flimsy negligees. Mark had showered and had a towel around his waist. She dropped the magazine she was reading to the floor.

"Come here, lover."

Mark moved to her and she pulled away his towel.

"Come. Let me admire my handsome man."

He couldn't wait; she had that effect on him. She drove him crazy.

"My God, Rhoda ..." Mark groaned.

She drew him onto the bed and knelt over him. His hands touched her gently as he brushed away the wisps of silk from her face.

"Lie still my love," she said.

Mark could detect the *Temptress* fragrance she wore for their times together.

Following the climax of adulation at LSD's screen performance, the lights dimmed and the crowd fell silent. It created a hiatus of expectation before the whirlwind of action that was to follow.

The back-up group started its drum roll and launched into '*Gimme what I want.*' The music faded and the focus of the excited masses shifted to a bright patch of light that burst into life in the middle of the stage, slowly panning towards the left centre.

And then, the idol himself was before them in the flesh! The crowd was awestruck for a microsecond before erupting into mass adulation.

He raised his hands in benediction and the band burst into cacophonous action. Their Messiah had arrived.

And He dwelt among us, the tall man reflected.

Mark stared through the window at the beach and the black sea beyond.

"Here's your beer, mate. Sorry to disturb you. Penny for your thoughts, or shouldn't I ask?"

Rhoda was a social creature. Her life centred on fashion shows, art exhibitions and the theatre. She showed little interest in Mark's work and he slowly realised she did not like being married to a humble acting assistant editor, until they got into bed.

Inevitably, the arguments started. His job was more important than she was! He didn't love her any more! Why didn't he make love as he used to?

The syncopated movement of LSD's head gave life to his whole body and the rhythmic pulsating of the electronic guitar – an erotic phallic extension of his pelvis that dominated his act. *'Gimme what I want'* left his enthralled audience in no doubt whatsoever what he wanted. The song ended in an orgasm of LSD's charisma, throbbing guitar chords, strident drums and discordant climax.

As the evening progressed, the tall man appeared to distance himself from the crowd, withdrawing into a thought-world of his own. His face was expressionless, except for the steely grey eyes that pierced the darkness incandescently as he stared at the gyrating figure.

An abomination, he said to himself.

LSD's performance ended two hours later. The final furore subsided and the crowds filtered through the exits, many still fired up by the emotional experience. Some couples sought the nearest, secluded spot to give vent to their pent-up energy. Others shared another round of booze and joints before making for the privacy of houses where they would party through the night listening to their precious recordings until exhaustion descended upon their intimately intertwined bodies.

He left with them.

The barman wore a nametag: "Fred".

"Tell me, Fred," Mark asked, "why's everything so quiet this evening – it's Saturday, man."

"You come from another planet or something? LSD's having a concert at the Newlands stadium. Finishes about eleven. Then, this place will really come to life."

That evening's performance had been the fourth of LSD's current tour. Each left him mentally and physically exhausted. Many legends had grown around his meteoric rise to fame some five years earlier. The distinction between fact and myth was blurred and became irrelevant. Only LSD really knew the answers and

he remained silent. How had he become to be known LSD? An acronymic coincidence or a calculated marketing ploy?

Apart from being an international pop star, LSD was also a shrewd businessman. He was a valuable commodity that had to be protected. His business agents and personal manager ensured that security precautions, especially when on tour, were of the highest professional standards.

The star found this claustrophobic but he and his guards arrived at a tacit compromise that would not have received the blessing of his business controllers had they known.

LSD loved the sea, even though he was not a good swimmer. He enjoyed walking and splashing like a child along the shoreline, jogging and sprinting along a stretch of beach in the early morning, before the strand became inundated with people. He allowed his guards to accompany him from the hotel and escort him by car to his favourite beach.

There, he left them and, dressed in a pair of running shorts, took to the sand, revelling in the fresh ozone and the soft smoothness and moisture beneath his feet. One guard, similarly dressed, followed him discretely. The beaches were deserted save for the occasional vagrant.

LSD jogged along quietly, his thoughts far removed from the concert stage. Here, he sought peace for himself, to renew his body and soul for the demands of the evening performance.

Just another two years, he promised himself, and then I'll buy a house along this very coast. Divine!

He approached an outcrop of boulders that protruded a short distance into the water. The bodyguard ambled after him, also enjoying the treat of the salty ozone freshness. He watched LSD gambol in the surf as he rounded the boulders some distance ahead. The guard reached the rocks some minutes later and followed LSD's route around them to the beach beyond.

He stopped dead in his tracks. LSD had disappeared. An icy fear gripped at the security man's guts. He was momentarily confused, then panic-stricken.

He looked to the sea, thinking LSD may have taken a dip. Nothing! He looked inland, perhaps the star had returned to the road. Nothing! He turned back to the boulders and clambered over them.

Violence and death were not unknown to him. They were part of his profession, but even he was not prepared for what he saw. The body was

wedged between two rocks. His throat had been cut savagely, almost decapitating him. A sharp instrument had carved two deep incisions into his torso, from below his throat to his groin and from nipple to nipple, in the form of a cross. The scarlet blood matted the hair on his chest. The downward thrust had been so savage it had cut through the band of LSD's running shorts, which hung limply around his hips.

The bodyguard raced up the beach, screaming to his colleagues.

LSD lay exposed to the burning sun as his life trickled into the sand.

Mark's phone rang at eight the next morning. He had roused five minutes earlier and was nursing his head. He made his way to his study, a posh word for the spare bedroom, stumbled over some shoes, and answered the phone. The sound of James Parkin's voice sobered him very quickly.

"That you, Mark? James here. LSD, the pop star's been murdered. Yes. On the beach, more or less opposite the Strand Hotel where he was staying. Get down there fast. I want you to work on this one. And, Mark..."

"Yes, chief."

"Don't foul it up. It has the making of an international story. This is the one you're been waiting for. Any questions?"

"I'm on my way, James."

Mark splashed water on his face, threw on some clothes and made for his car.

Some of the police cars still had their blue lights flashing. The beach was cluttered by police and bystanders getting in their way. As Mark made his way to the screen placed around the rocky outcrop, a large police bus drew up and unloaded more policemen with specialist equipment and a couple of police dogs.

"Move along, please. There's nothing to be seen. Allow the detectives to get on with their investigations. We don't want to obstruct the police, do we now?"

The police sergeant's words carried an implied threat that led to disappointed muttering and a movement of people back to the beach road.

Mark reached the canvas screen around the rocks. The only opening was guarded by a constable who recognised Mark and allowed him through. Inside,

he spotted the familiar figure of Superintendent Ryan Forrest, head of the Western Cape criminal investigation department.

"Can you spare me a minute, super?"

Ryan turned.

"In a moment, Mark."

He gave a few instructions and joined the reporter.

"Come with me."

They entered the inner screened-off area.

"Don't go any closer," Ryan said. "The lab guys are still working."

Mark watched the three specialists sifting through the sand around the rocks. He noticed a pair of bare feet protruding between the forensic experts examining the body. They were talking in clipped tones and stood up to speak to Forrest.

Mark saw the mutilated figure lying in front of him. LSD's skin was chalk-white against the bloodstained sand. He saw the grotesque, gaping slash across the victim's throat. His head was tilted back at an unnatural angle, the dull black hair powdered with sand.

White flecks were discernible at a few spots along the two deep cuts of the cross. LSD had been slashed down to the sternum and his ribs.

The torn and bloodied running shorts had been removed and placed in a plastic bag next to his body.

The potent, dynamic sexual image that LSD had projected on stage and screen had disappeared. The naked LSD looked humiliated and violated – his ardent fans may have used the word 'desecrated'.

Mark instinctively raised a hand to wave away the flies that were gathering.

(To be continued)