

Legendary Tales

The world of urban legends contains mystical fables about life

By RHONDA REINHART
Staff writer

This happened just a few years ago out on the road that turns off 59 Highway by the Holiday Inn. This couple were parked under a tree out his road. Well, it got to be time for the girl to be at the dorm, so she told her boyfriend that they'd start back. But the car wouldn't start, so he got her to lock herself in the car and he would go to the Holiday Inn and call for help. Well, he didn't come back and he didn't come back, and pretty soon she started hearing a scratching noise on the roof of the car. "Scratch, scratch... scratch, scratch." She got scareder and scareder, but he didn't come back. Finally, when it was almost daylight, some people came along and stopped and helped her out of the car and she looked up and there was her boyfriend hanging from the tree, and his feet were scraping against the roof of the car. This is why the road is called "Hangman's Road."

—From *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings*

Specific details. Plausible scenario. Generally believable.

More than likely, you've heard a variation of this "scary" story called "The Boyfriend's Death." You have probably passed it on to others, and you might have even believed it. To folklorists, the tale and others like it are known as urban legends, realistic stories about everyday events with an ironic or supernatural twist.

In *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings*, Jan Harold Brunvand writes that urban legends gain credibility from specific details of time and place or references to real authorities.

The storytellers assume that the true facts of each tale lie just one or two informants back down the line

with a reliable witness, or in a news media report," Brunvand writes. "In common with age-old folk legends about lost mines, buried treasure, omens, ghosts and Robin Hood-like outlaw heroes, urban legends are told seriously, circulate largely by word of mouth, are generally anonymous, and vary constantly in particular details from one telling to another..."

Society often updates urban legends to include recent events, and they almost always are passed down from a friend of a friend.

Ed Walraven, a journalism lecturer and amateur folklorist, said part of the mystery of urban legends lies with who creates the stories.

"Nobody knows how they get started," he said, "and nobody knows where they go when they're not being told."

Although the sources of urban legends tend to elude folklorists, researchers have theories on why these tales have escaped mortality and permeated all aspects of society.

Walraven said urban legends are a way for people to express general suspicion of institutions and to release pressures on a society.

"We're always afraid of things being out of our control," he said. "They (urban legends) really are meant as a coping mechanism to help us deal with our perception of the unfairness or difficulty of living in a modern age with technology and things we don't have control over."

Recurring themes in urban legends include everything from food-contamination to maniacal killers on the loose in college dormitories. The stories have showed up time and again in movies and television shows, and there is often a lesson to be learned from the unsuspecting victims of the tales.

The couple in "The Boyfriend's Death" should have known better than to travel alone on a dark road in an unreliable vehicle. But they did it anyway and look at what happened to them. Tell this story around a camp fire at night, and the listeners may think twice before

they embark on a similar adventure.

• **Fright Nights**

Many urban legends have the same sort of scare factor as "The Boyfriend's Death," Brunvand writes. "... urban legends gratify our desire to know about and to try to understand bizarre, frightening and potentially dangerous or embarrassing events that may have happened. These floating stories appeal to our morbid curiosity and satisfy our sensation-seeking minds..."

Stories like "The Hook" and "The Killer in the Backseat" involve nighttime escapades with crazed killers and make for juicy ways to add excitement to slumber parties and late-night gab sessions.

As "The Hook" goes, a young man and his date are parked on "Lovers' Lane" when they hear on the radio that an escaped convict is loose in the area. The man is described as having a hook instead of a right hand. The couple get scared and hurry home. When the fellow opens the door for his date, he discovers a hook on the door handle.

Along the same lines, "The Killer in the Backseat" involves a woman in a dangerous situation with a would-be murderer.

One of the functions of all folklore, Walraven said, is entertainment. And urban legends fit the bill.

"Society sees a need for these kinds of stories," he said. "They scare us. They entertain us cheaply."

He said urban legends tend to have an element of poetic justice.

"Somebody ends up getting what they deserve, even if they escape the law," he said. "Sometimes the little guy gets justice in the end and sometimes he gets screwed."

• **Fight the Power**

Urban legends often maintain strong currents of distrust of institutions such as universities, hospitals

and big business.

Walraven said urban legends tend to poke fun at the powers that be.

"University-based urban legends usually deal with students getting justice, getting even or pulling something over on the professor," he said. "The stories tend to give students inspiration."

From sinking libraries to canceled classes attributed to late professors, urban legends thrive on university campuses.

The tales are believable, and they are also believed. The number of college freshmen who actually trusted in "The Suicide Rule" (university gives surviving roommate a 4.0) is probably surprisingly high.

The case of the sinking library has circulated at Texas A&M and other universities.

This urban legend involves library architects who, when designing the library, forgot to account for the weight of the books. As a result, the library is continually sinking.

• **Believe It Or Not?**

Urban legends travel fast, and they are widespread. Countless numbers of aunts' neighbors' friends have heard tales like "The Baby on the Roof" (mother forgets baby on roof of car) and "The Kentucky-Fried Rat" (fried rodent served as chicken).

One might think that in a society where activities such as the Internet, video games and television are so widely available, people would not take the time to revert to such a cheap form of entertainment as storytelling. But the pastime lives on.

So the next time the electricity gets knocked out and the computer becomes a useless piece of machinery, call on your imagination.

Light a few candles and pass on an urban legend. No batteries are required for a creative mind.

OPENING ACTS

| Thursday | Friday | Saturday |
|---|---|---|
| Highway 6 @ Shadow Canyon, singing "The Fightin' Texas Aggie Song" | • Blue Earth (alternative) @ The Crooked Path Ale House | • Six Mile Bridge (celtic) @ The Crooked Path Ale House |
| Battle of the Bands @ Dixie Theater (8 p.m. - 1 a.m.), featuring Blue Earth, Linus, Kid Fantastic | • Kid Fantastic @ The Cow Hop | • The Great James Band @ The Cow Hop |
| Reckless Panhandlers (rock) @ The Crooked Path Ale House | • Ronnie Po @ Sweet Eugene's | • Ruthie Foster @ Fitzwilly's |
| Inspector 12 @ The Cow Hop | • Gary P. Nunn @ 3rd Floor Cantina | • The Groobies @ Sweet Eugene's |
| • Don Overby @ Fitzwilly's | | • The Texas Twisters @ 3rd Floor Cantina |

Our Lady Peace perpetuates tradition of alterna-rage rock



JAMES FRANCIS
aggiefLife editor

I first heard of Our Lady Peace on a *Modern Rock* compilation CD, with the song "Hope." Since then, it seemed ages before hearing "Superman's Dead,"

a song that not only has the energy-drive of a Mac 10 truck, but also contains lead singer Raine Maida's sometimes ear-piercing high-pitched vocal.

The "screaming vocal" has gradually become a tradition among alternative rock groups, such as Matchbox 20 with its "Push" and Third Eye Blind with its "Graduate."

But something must be right, because it seems people cannot get enough of rage-rock these days. Granted, Our Lady Peace and its fellow rockers create somber and slow tracks every now and then, but for the most part, the tunes people remember are those with high-pumping drums, guitars and angered vocals.

On *clumsy*, Our Lady Peace gives listeners the kind of music they would take long drives to — hard thumping, and if you turn the volume up loud

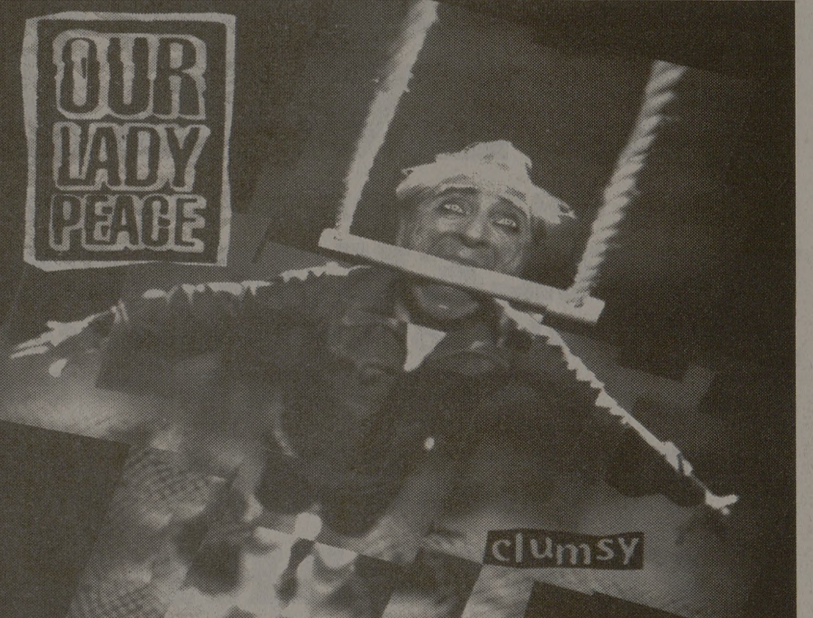
Our Lady Peace
clumsy
Columbia Records
Critique: B-

enough, almost deafening. With lyrics on "Superman's Dead" such as, "do you worry that

you're not liked / how long till you break / you're happy cause you smile / but how much can you fake," it's clear the band needs work on writing down words that actually mean something.

But still, the water-logged title track, *clumsy*, brings out the best in Our Lady Peace.

The band might be compared to a million others in the music industry, but they seem to be having fun with their music and working hard to improve.



"QUOTE OF THE DAY"

This Week's Theme: What is your favorite movie and why?

"Lonesome Dove. A movie has to be great with a horse named HellBitch in it."
— Cody Lane
Sophomore agricultural economics major

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