

The Harder They Fall
Celebrities Tell Their Real-Life Stories
of Addiction and Recovery

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Introduction by Gary Stromberg

They started arriving at my Malibu Canyon home not long after sunrise that bright spring morning. The early birds were there to have first crack at the “good stuff.” It was listed as an estate sale, but what it was essentially was a last ditch effort at raising some cash to finance my exit. Since the bank had already foreclosed on my house, there seemed little sense in trying to keep its contents. Items big and small, valuable and not so valuable, were on display throughout the three Spanish colonial-type buildings that comprised my self-styled hacienda. A plush new pool table, a thousand or so record albums, items from a well-outfitted kitchen, gold records commemorating my association with hit music and film projects, paintings of varying value including my prized original by Jonathan Winters, all kinds of velvet- and leather-covered furniture right out of the hippie culture I grew up in—everything I had acquired in my years of aggressive consumption was on display and for sale. I even got a friend to remove the original stained-glass windows from many of the rooms and replace them with clear panes. I thought these might bring a pretty penny, but the bank, which sent a representative to observe this fire sale, had other ideas. Unless I replaced the stained glass immediately, they were going to lock me out of the house, nullifying the thirty days they gave me to vacate.

Two years earlier, I had purchased this beautiful villa on two-plus acres of prime coastal foothill land at the suggestion of my business manager. I was riding high at the time, having finished producing my second major-studio feature movie. Who had any inkling that twelve years of nonstop drug use was about to take me down?

When things were going good, I had a sense of being invincible. The Midas touch. I had helped build a hugely successful public relations firm, Gibson & Stromberg, representing a virtual who’s who of contemporary music talent in the sixties and seventies. Touring the world with the Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd. Helping launch the careers of Elton John, the gnome-like Marc Bolan of T-Rex, Cat Stevens, The Doors, Earth, Wind & Fire, Steely Dan, James Taylor, Steppenwolf, Three Dog Night, Jethro Tull. The list went on.

Life was a ball, an exhilarating wild ride. In 1974, I was asked to do the publicity for the music festival that was to precede the Muhammad Ali–George Foreman “Rumble in the Jungle,” which was the subject of the Academy Award–winning documentary *When We Were Kings*. Two hundred and fifty American and African musicians assembled in Kinshasa, Zaire, for an unbelievable musical event. Being a huge fight fan, I immediately headed for the Ali training camp and eventually was introduced to Drew “Bundini” Brown, Ali’s inimitable corner man. One thing led to another, and the next thing I knew, Bundini and I were riding with our guide into neighboring Swaziland, a postage stamp-sized country where we heard that the German pharmaceutical giant, Merck, had a factory producing pharmaceutical cocaine. Talk about kids in a candy store!

Even when my drug use escalated to the point where I lost touch with my business and watched it disintegrate, I still didn’t recognize that I had a problem. Another career was what I thought would fix it.

Because of the success of my public relations firm, I was given a chance at producing a movie. Universal Studios decided that a concept for a film I had come up with called *Car Wash* was worth a shot. Two years of hard work, ever-increasing drug use, and more than my share of good fortune found me riding high once again. The movie was a pretty big hit, and I was believing all the bullshit.

Before long I was producing my second movie, a little confection entitled *The Fish That Saved Pittsburgh*, a loony comedy about basketball and astrology, with a strong dose of R & B music, that was conceived and written in one rollicking night of gluttonous coke snorting. It was during the filming of *Fish* that things really began to take a turn for the worse. By now I was using with complete abandon, ingesting dangerous amounts of cocaine and heroin. I was on location in Pittsburgh, ostensibly in charge of the production of the movie, but things were out of control. Costs for the filming were skyrocketing, and no one was running the show. The studio bosses, needless to say, were losing patience, and several phone calls to me expressing their concern did little good. Finally they took matters into their own hands and sent a pair of representatives to our location and physically removed me from command. The next thing I remember was waking up in some fancy hotel room and looking around, trying to figure out what was going on. Merritt Island, Florida, is where they forced me to detox and come to my senses before I was allowed back on the film set.

The movie was a financial disaster, as was my career. Word began to spread that my drug use was out of control and that my work was erratic, at best. I was quickly becoming unemployable, and it wasn't long till the roof fell in.

In the summer of 1980, after losing my house, my woman, and my career to the excesses of wild living and drug abuse, I took the suggestion of one of my last remaining friends, Shep Gordon, and moved to Kihei, Hawaii, on the sun-baked island of Maui. Shep, Alice Cooper's manager and a real maven in the music business, had a sprawling beachfront home there and thought getting away from Los Angeles would do me some good. Nothing like carefree island life to get one's shit together.

My game plan was simple. Try to stop using drugs, excluding the ubiquitous Maui Wowie pot everyone over there smokes, and the five, six, or ten daily beers you need to keep hydrated under the powerful tropical sun.

On Maui I had nothing to do but be with me, and that didn't seem like such a great gig. True, the islands are spectacular and the living was easy and grand, but alone at night, I had plenty of time to contemplate the mess I had created. I also had some physical healing to do. Years of abuse had left me worn down, and I took this opportunity to repair some of the damage. Having kicked my heroin addiction for the third or fourth time and knowing that coke use in Hawaii was absurd—why would anyone want to be jacked up in such a laid-back place—I started on a mission of wellness. I attacked it like most things in my life, with blind resolve to accomplish something. Hawaii is a mecca of health, so this was a relatively easy task. I took up running in 1980, a discipline I have continued to this day, and saw benefits right away. I also joined a “seniors” six-man

Hawaiian outrigger canoe team, made up of six guys over the age of thirty-five. We trained at sunrise each morning, and on weekends we paddled in long-distance races on the open ocean. I started eating with some consciousness, even took to occasional fasts and began to embrace vegetarianism. Restoring my body was easy, but my mind and soul would require greater effort.

A year later I was back in Los Angeles trying to pick up the pieces. Virtually broke, I moved back into the house I was raised in. A forty-year-old failed big shot living with his parents. Feelings of utter defeat were creeping back. I was trying to stay clean, but life without hope was impossible. Once again drugs got the better of me, and I began chipping again. I remember one night my great friend Joel Dorn, a brilliant, underappreciated record producer, was visiting from New York. It was my mother's birthday, and she suggested I bring him over for dinner. The rest of the story is what Joel remembers. Apparently I was high when he arrived, and midway through dinner I nodded out . . . right into a full plate of Mom's brisket and mashed potatoes. Joel pulled me up by my hair and made some excuse about how "tired" I was, but the hurt and shock showed all over my parents' faces. Joel never lets me forget that night.

Not long after this, a miracle occurred in my life. I was browsing the newspaper on a quiet Sunday morning when I happened across an article about a new Twelve Step program that had recently begun in my area. Without knowing why, I picked up the phone and made a call. That very same day I was attending my first meeting, and soon after, I began my journey into sobriety.

Strength came where weakness was not known to be,
at least not felt; and restoration came
Like an intruder knocking at the door
of unacknowledged weariness.

—William Wordsworth, "The Prelude"

That was a little over twenty-two years ago, and it's been quite a trip. Looking back over the years and my history of substance abuse, here is what I can say is true for me: It started out as great fun. For someone shy like me, drugs made me bigger and bolder. Eventually drugs and alcohol got the best of me. The fun became depravity. I was without purpose, wrestling with my demons, and lost. The facade fell. I crashed and burned, but the will to survive took over. I was given the greatest gift I've ever received: sobriety. And with it came a new life.

Jane notes that pain, growth, and spiritual evolution don't belong only to those with an addiction. In my view, it is all a means to an end. Through grace, people shuck off the bark of all kinds of sickness and despair. We believe that you don't have to have gone through addiction to identify with the days of doubt and nights of sorrow, the enlightenments and transformations of the recovering addict. What we can see as particularly characteristic of many in recovery is their candor about their struggles and their humor about themselves.

Jane and I became running companions long ago, and runners talk. She encouraged me to tell 1001 stories, morning after morning, while she responded on the uphill. For instance, she found delightful the camaraderie I took for granted from the shakers and movers in the entertainment world. The land of carefree living seemed exotic to her. She would shake her head at the wretched misery that some of the *jeunesse dorée* fell into. She wanted to record these incidences of human spirit, and as we ran, this became the genesis of our book.

In the following chapters you are going to meet some remarkable people. I hope their stories will touch your heart, and if you have issues with substance abuse, perhaps they will inspire you to seek help.