



## BASEBALL SAVES

## Devils in the Outfield

By Brian Staker, 2-06-06

As a darkly humorous account of one side of the American dream gone wrong and a kind of redemption found, John Albert's *Wrecking Crew* (Scribner) is an obsessive page-turner, in the great naturalist comic tradition, and all the more moving because it's a true account. Albert was a drummer in several seminal Los Angeles punk rock bands (Bad Religion, Chrisitan Death), but never got to see some of the fame and riches of some other locals who made it big. Like many other misfit musicians and struggling actors in the area, he descended into a life of gambling, narcotics abuse and risky sexual behavior that decimates young talents. Until, along with a motley crew of similarly cynical friends, he discovered salvation in baseball, starting an adult-league team that would be male bonding, support network, and for many of them, their only link with any kind of balanced life.



Caption: *Wrecking Crew* author John Albert

*Wrecking Crew* is written in a chatty, conversational style that belies just what an intelligent voice Albert has, whether noting LA sites famous for scenes in films, reciting chapter and verse of SoCal punk history, or quoting *The Maltese Falcon*. It's a darkly humorous read too, with its riotous anecdotes of writing screenplays on painkillers or the bittersweet tale of Dave Navarro's cousin Johnny hiring a prostitute and then falling desperately in love with her. The book is an allegory of so many things American: ambition, rebellion and addiction and, far from least, the fame-obsessed LA culture that the rest of America is jonesin' to become. Albert covered all the bases in recounting the path he took to writing the book, which has been optioned by Paramount.

This slovenly squad was assembled slowly, player-by-player, beginning the day Albert's friend Mike Coulter (from the indie rock band Lifter) asked him out of the blue to play catch while sweating out a heroin run. Coulter later ran into straight-laced ex-little league coach Jordan Marshall at the ballpark and the two concocted the Griffith Park Pirates. The circumstances around the rest of this grown-up Bad News Bears are, appropriately, a comedy of errors: Coulter suggested Navarro join after they capped their Hollywood AA meeting with a gambling-and-hookers spree. Cross-dressing music-video prop man Chris Casey met Coulter on a shoot, attracted by the "Fuck the Yankees" sticker on Coulter's van. Others fell in until they had enough to field a team.

Asked what the common denominator was with all these guys from fairly divergent

backgrounds, Albert says “We hadn’t realized our dreams, and were all trying to deal with that. It’s intensified in LA, because there you are either incredibly successful and young, or nothing. Some of them were still searching, and had glimpses of it.□ However, people pursue those dreams sometimes exactly because they’re damaged. If you’re a star, the world will love you, they reason. “But those pursuits are fairly unforgiving,□ Albert explains. “We were all feeling fairly alone.□

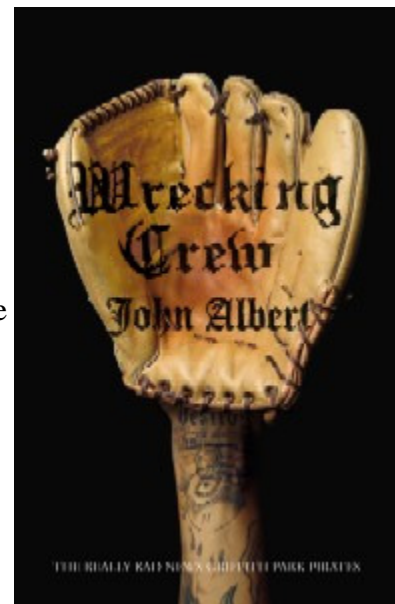
It was a surprisingly short time until baseball became an addiction, but the old addictions still beckoned. “A lot of us started gambling, using drugs and alcohol early on; it was already there,□ he mused. “What those things do is make you rearrange your priorities, and completely isolate you.□ Jacob Hedman who came to LA to be a star and ended up doing landscaping for the stars. “While he may have been exceptional at home, he was just another wannabe in LA. He turned to drugs because they were available.□

One of the things baseball did was to bring their lives back into focus, he reasons; “it enabled us to live our lives in the present. We were all either remorseful of our past, or focused on our future. Baseball obliterated all of that. It probably could have been anything, but it was the game. It had a certain purity that wasn’t lost on us. It gave us a chance to get our innocence back. “Just sitting there playing baseball, I said to myself, I can’t believe I’m having these types of days again. Life gets so complicated. One of the most profound things that baseball did was make it seem simple again, if only for a short while. The people in the book who went back to their addictions, the one thing they miss is the game.□

Clay Jefferson, the teammate closest to success (with the major-label hard rock band Junkyard), returned to the needle’s lure. Why didn’t baseball work for everyone? “Drug addiction is a baffling and deadly thing. Why does anyone go back when they know they don’t have to? Sometimes you can see it coming, and sometimes you can’t. Having a group of friends, they will come looking for you if you don’t show up. There were so many people I knew who didn’t have that. When fielder Dave Huffman od’ed, it was because the guys on the team came to look for him that saved his life.□

Huffman’s side story is another tale, with a Utah link. His girlfriend had him kidnapped and sent to the Provo Canyon School to try to get him cleaned up. “I looked out my window at the mountains and thought, ‘how the hell do I get out of here?’□ he remembers. “The Mormons seemed so fascistic. I had a friend who tried running away in winter and got hypothermia from hiding in a snowbank.□ Eventually Huffman returned to California and the diamond. “The process of staying stopped for me has been based in a spiritual solution. I had to look outside of myself for the power to live on life’s terms.□

The anecdotally brief chapters seem made for filming, more than slightly ironic since several of the players were wannabe actors. Albert’s simple yet visually rich writing style gives the ludicrous its own kind of poetry, like this scene with his screenwriting partner, the heroin-addicted Teo, on a fan-cooled summer day: “The hound walked over, stood by the doorway, and peered in. Then, in a moment of sheer beauty, it lifted a leg and peed right into the whirring fan



blade, instantly sending a thick cloud of dog piss into the apartment and splashing directly into Teo's startled face. □ That is matched in hilarity by Albert's prank of answering an ad seeking used underwear, giving Coulter's name. But then there is the awe-inspiring beauty of this: "when I'm flying in a plane, I look down and see baseball diamonds—each just a brown square inside a larger green square. They're everywhere, and they look like nothing else. □

The team found baseball had its own seductions, not the least of which was the thrill of victory. "At first it was just about playing, □ he recalls. "But once we won a game, this unforeseen feeling came; it felt really good, about ourselves, about our team. It validated us on a certain level. Winning a game on Sunday made us feel good for days. Our addictive natures took over. □

The organized practicing surprised them as well. But it also made a kind of sense. "Addicts are all high achievers, in terms of getting the drug, □ he explains. "It's so goal-oriented; drug abusers are streamlined to one thing, a kind of ambition. Baseball became that. □ He continues, "For most of us, even dreams of moderate success were fairly unrealistic. The thing about baseball, though, it might have been insignificant in terms of the world, but it was one of the few positive things in our lives.

"A lot of us grew up living like teenagers, drinking, going to nightclubs, getting into fights. Little league teaches kids values, and most of us had missed those lessons. We got some lessons from baseball. We've become well-adjusted. I look at myself, and am startled to find that I'm basically a happy person, □ he laughs.

As far as that myth that you'll make all these compromises and become less happy, he found the opposite is true. "A lot of us have gotten married. It comes from making peace with ourselves. It happened a lot of different ways. We're not as angry or alone. When you stop trying to destroy yourself, and you can sustain that for a period of time, you can learn how to live. For a strange reason, baseball helped us do that. □

They learned the rules to get along in life. "We aren't like thirty year old guys trying to be teenagers anymore. Except Johnny Navarro. □ **[End of article]**

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