What follows is a story I’ve told many times, and if it works it is because it ends with me in jail.

Sometimes I tell it as if I’ve never been set free, and then it works even better.

Some background: Legend has it that only a miniscule number of people bought the Velvet Underground’s first album, but that each one of them went out and formed their own band—such was the reach of their influence, or so the story goes. I can think of no one who formed a band after buying Mink DeVille’s first album. All traces of their influence, if there were any, are lost. Still, their eponymously named debut album, from 1977, is a masterpiece, but most people have never even heard of it, or only vaguely if they have.

The story: I saw Mink DeVille at a club in Boston when this album was still on display at the front of the record store in the mall, the mall a half an hour from my house. A worker there must have liked it, for it occupied that front rack for months, though it went unbought and unknown, at least in my hometown, except among my small gang of friends, and this in part was what attracted us to it. My friends and I were the only ones who knew how perfect it was, and each song (“She’s So Tough,” “Spanish Stroll,” “Cadillac Walk,” “Mixed Up, Shook Up Girl”—a handful more) was ours alone. Perhaps the appeal of the underdog was part of our devotion, for we were, or at least felt we were, misfits.

On the cover of that first album Willy DeVille’s gaunt face stares out from an orange background in three-quarter profile, his cheekbones jutting like wings beneath his deer-in-the-light eyes, outsized eyes, junkie-gaunt, hair slicked back. 

Mink DeVille became the soundtrack to our last year of high school, and that same winter they played the Paradise in Boston, which seemed the center of a certain smoky bleary universe, and which it was easy to drink in with my brother’s i.d. We drove the hour in from the suburbs, and in that hour we drank, and this drinking continued in the club, so much so that I knocked over some tables every time I stood up, and I stood up at the beginning of every song, so I knocked over many tables, upended many drinks. We had a table in the front, and midway through the set Willy DeVille gestured once to me, for a sip of my beer, and I handed it up to him, and he tilted it to his lips, and passed it back.

Understand, we were kids stranded in the teenage wasteland of the suburbs, before it was pharmacologically transformed into the daydream nation of the 80s, before traces of prozac were reported in the drinking water, before we as a
country decided to accept the unacceptable and watched as our children stepped over bodies sleeping on the streets on their way to school. Then Mink DeVille appeared, with their weird hybrid of punk discord and soul, a harmonic wail from a doowop street corner. It’s odd to imagine it was once considered punk in any way, so distant from the hardcore that would soon become my breakfast of champions. Willy DeVille didn’t sing politics like The Clash, he was clearly an anachronism, the last stop of innocence as Reagan’s limousine rolled down Pennsylvania Avenue into the Whitehouse for the first time. We still felt safe in our leftover 60s haze; we had an army amassed on the border that would easily defeat him—John Frikken Lennon. Bob Freakin Marley. Marvin Fucken Gaye. Yet Reagan rolled in and one-by-one they died.

Of course, there were the reservists: Patti Smith, Pil, The (aforementioned) Clash. Yet one-by-one they simply left the room, decided to unplug. Maybe drugs were involved, cocaine up a mule’s ass—the country was awash in drugs. When Patti walked away everyone noticed, but she never said she’d return, never said wait, she just stepped off a cliff, and we figured she’d risen up but it was just as likely she sank straight down. Or became a vapor. Or was reborn as Kurt Cobain. Or Michael Stipe. Or Cat Power. She transformed. A penny we passed and didn’t pick up and blamed for our bad luck from that day on. It was all our fault. We had nothing to do with it.

After that, some stood before us onstage but were no longer there, not really. The last time I saw Johnny Rotten, in the mid-80s, he was drunk, staggering around the stage dressed, appropriately, as a clown, following in Basquiat’s floppy shoes, Basquiat who by the end had, tragically, exchanged his crown for black face. But where the hell did The Clash go? Was it just a coincidence they all decided to pass on 1980s America? Others replaced them. But did any threaten to change the world?

Willy DeVille had never threatened to change the world, but on that first album he was at least awake. Like any great art, it is both transforming and eternal, contains both matter and anti-matter, being and non-being, self and non-self—it embodies duality. And listening, it was clear that all us sleepwalkers could also awaken. We didn’t know he was already strapping himself into his duct-tape time machine, flying backwards into the land of nostalgia and string-sections, into boogie-woogie and tinpan, so that when he disappeared he didn’t exactly go, but he didn’t exactly stay either. Always both coming and going--that was part of his greatness. He seemed to suggest he’d be back in a minute, like when a concert ends and we stand applauding and yelping. But it went on for hours, then years, and the lights never came up, the doors never opened.

I said this would end with me in jail. Here I am. It is cold and they have taken my belt and coat and socks and the cell has a metal bed and cinderblock walls and a
broken window. Snow falls on me as I try to sleep. My other friends are in adjacent cells, but we can't see each other. We can talk, but we are still drunk and what is said is not important. At some point in the night someone screams from another cell that he's fallen and cut his head. He is not one of us, wasn't in the car with us after the concert when we were pulled over and handcuffed and tossed in the back of separate cruisers. He screams for hours and hours it seems. The guards tell him to shut the fuck up. He screams that he's bleeding to death. We saw him carried in earlier and heard that he was on angel dust. After an hour of screaming he pries the toilet off his wall and smashes it against the bars, and water slowly begins to fill the cells. We don't have our shoes, remember, so if we step down our feet get wet. We all begin yelling, and the guards come, and they drag the screaming guy out, and bring him back hours later, his head shaved and stitched up, wearing a straightjacket. In the morning we are shackled together in a line and led into a van which brings us to a court where we will stand before a judge and be given fines. I am shackled to the screaming guy, who is still in his straightjacket. When we are finally set free we have to ask what town we are in, and we have to ask where our car ended up, and how to get to it.

GQ version
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Legend has it that only a miniscule number of people bought the Velvet Underground’s first album, but that each one of them went out and formed their own band—such was the reach of their influence, so the story goes. I can think of no one who formed a band after buying Mink DeVille’s first album. All traces of their influence, if there were any, are lost. Still, their debut album, Cabretta, from 1977, is a masterpiece, but most people have never even heard of it, or only vaguely if they have.

On the cover of that first album Willy DeVille’s gaunt face stared out from the front rack at the record store in three-quarter profile, his cheekbones jutting like wings beneath his deer-in-the-light eyes. The store was in the mall a half hour from my house, and a worker there must have liked it, for it occupied that front rack for months. But it went unbought and unknown, at least in my hometown, except among my small gang of friends, and this in part was what attracted us to it. My friends and I were the only ones who knew how perfect it was, and each song (“She’s So Tough”, “Spanish Stroll”, “Cadillac Walk”, “Mixed Up Shook Up Girl”, a handful more) was ours alone. Perhaps the appeal of the underdog was part of our devotion. These same four friends and I saw him within a year of this first album, at the Paradise in Boston, and the show was so good we never made it home, spending the night in the Hyde Park jail for causing a ruckus. When we woke up in the morning we had to ask the jailor what town we were locked up in.
That's how good it was.

Understand, we were just kids, stranded in the teenage wasteland of the suburbs, before it was pharmacologically transformed into the daydream nation of the eighties. Then Mink DeVeille appeared, with their weird hybrid of punk dischord and soul, a harmonic wail from a street corner and if we didn’t notice that one of his feet was firmly planted in doowop that was our fault. When I listen now it is clearly there, and it’s odd to imagine it was once considered punk in any way, so distant from the hardcore that would soon become my “breakfast of champions.” At one point on Spanish Stroll Willy breaks into Spanish, a plea to a woman named Rosita, an echo of Stevie Wonder on Innervisions (“I speak very very fluent Spanish…”). It is clearly as much a soul album as a punk album—but with each subsequent album Willy took the band further backward in time, from to the street corners of doowop, then down into a New Orleans boogie-woogie dancehall, then into the lost kingdoms of ragtime and cajun—hell, as far as I know he’s still strapped into his duct-taped time machine. For a few years after that first masterpiece Mink DeVeille released an album a year, but each year it got less and less cool to listen to them, for they were no longer of our century. With each subsequent album there were fewer and fewer songs to return to, until the band finally went silent, or might as well have. Willy DeVeille didn’t exactly go, but he didn’t exactly stay—maybe drugs were involved—probably—cocaine up a mule’s ass, the country was awash in drugs. Word was he skipped off to Europe, and he seemed to suggest he’d be back in a minute, like when a concert ends and we stand applauding and yelping, but it went on for hours, then years, and the lights never came up, the doors never opened.

I don’t know if Mink Deville’s Cabretta is great art—transformative and eternal at once, containing both matter and anti-matter, being and non-being, self and non-self, but it’s damn close. It does seem to embody a certain duality, straddling punk and soul, doowop and rebel yell, love ballad and threat. Willy DeVeille himself was always both coming and going, and that was, is, part of his greatness.