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WITH THE BAND DEPT.
BLIND DATE

When Bob Weir comes to New York, Billy Procida, a real-estate investor, usually has a dinner for him. Weir is the surviving guitarist of the Grateful Dead, and he now tours with his own band, RatDog. Recently, RatDog played at the Beacon Theatre for three nights. The night before the first concert, Procida, who invests money for some of the musicians, joined the band and a number of investment bankers for dinner at Jovia, on East Sixty-second Street. Dinner is where Donald Trump's name came up. "I'm the boy Trump," Procida often says. "The original apprentice." Procida is forty-two. He grew up in New Jersey. His father was a contractor. When he graduated from high school, Procida built a Mediterranean-style condominium complex called White Beach on a few acres of land along the East River in the Bronx near the Throgs Neck Bridge. He included a marina for the residents' boats and called the project a docko-minium. (For a time, he had a twenty-six-foot boat himself, on which he threw parties, but it sank.)

Shortly before Procida began White Beach, he wrote his first letter to Trump, whom he regarded as a hero. He asked for fifteen minutes of his time. He received a form letter in return. He continued to write. He thinks that by the time Trump hired him, in 1990, he had sent about twenty letters. He worked for Trump for a year.

The dinner at Jovia included forty people. "It was bedlam," Procida says. At one point, he was telling his guests about a radio contest he is running

in St. Louis, where he is putting up a housing complex. The contest, called *The Protégé*, is based on "The Apprentice." The winner gets a job with Procida and an apartment in the complex. During the conversation, Procida says, "someone mentions Trump, and, next thing I know, they're voting on it. Bob's not a dictator. Everything is voted, and it's approved: we bring Donald to the RatDog show."

In the morning, Procida called Trump. "My schedule's jammed," Trump tells me. "I've got to go to Al Sharpton's event at the Sheraton. I don't think I can do it." The next evening, shortly before RatDog was to take the stage, Procida's phone rang. "It's Trump," Procida says. "I can make it," he tells me. "But I only got ten minutes."

Before a show, Weir gathers the band members in his dressing room to warm up their voices. They were just about to run through the song "Attics of My Life." "Then there was The Donald in the hallway," Weir says. "I haven't seen that much of him, but I knew who it was. He had the suit and the hair." They talked for a few minutes—Trump said that he might like to have Weir on "The Apprentice"—and then it was time for the musicians to perform. The band walked on with Trump, and Weir followed a few feet behind. The audience fell silent. There were some catcalls. "He was walking straight into the teeth of a fairly tough crowd," Weir says. "He's got nerve."

Trump strode to the center of the stage. "I winged it," he says. "I told them, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that I'll be speaking to you for a while tonight—I'll be speaking about success and business—and the bad news is that Bob can't be here."

Procida: "He said, 'I'll be taking Bob's place with the band tonight. I'll be singing, maybe do some of my own stuff.' And they went nuts—they all booed. They went crazy."

Trump, looking shiny in the stage lights, smiled and waved and walked offstage. He decided to join the audience and listen for a while. "I tell him, 'Donald, all I got for protection is bankers,'" Procida says. "Fortunately, they're big bankers." In the audience, fans kept approaching Trump and high-fiving him. "Finally, we had to build a wall of bankers around him," Procida says. "He leaves just after the first set ends. His tie's undone and hanging off to the side. In all the years, I never saw him that way."

"I had a great time," Trump said later. "But I had to get home. I just had a baby, you know."

—Alec Wilkinson

