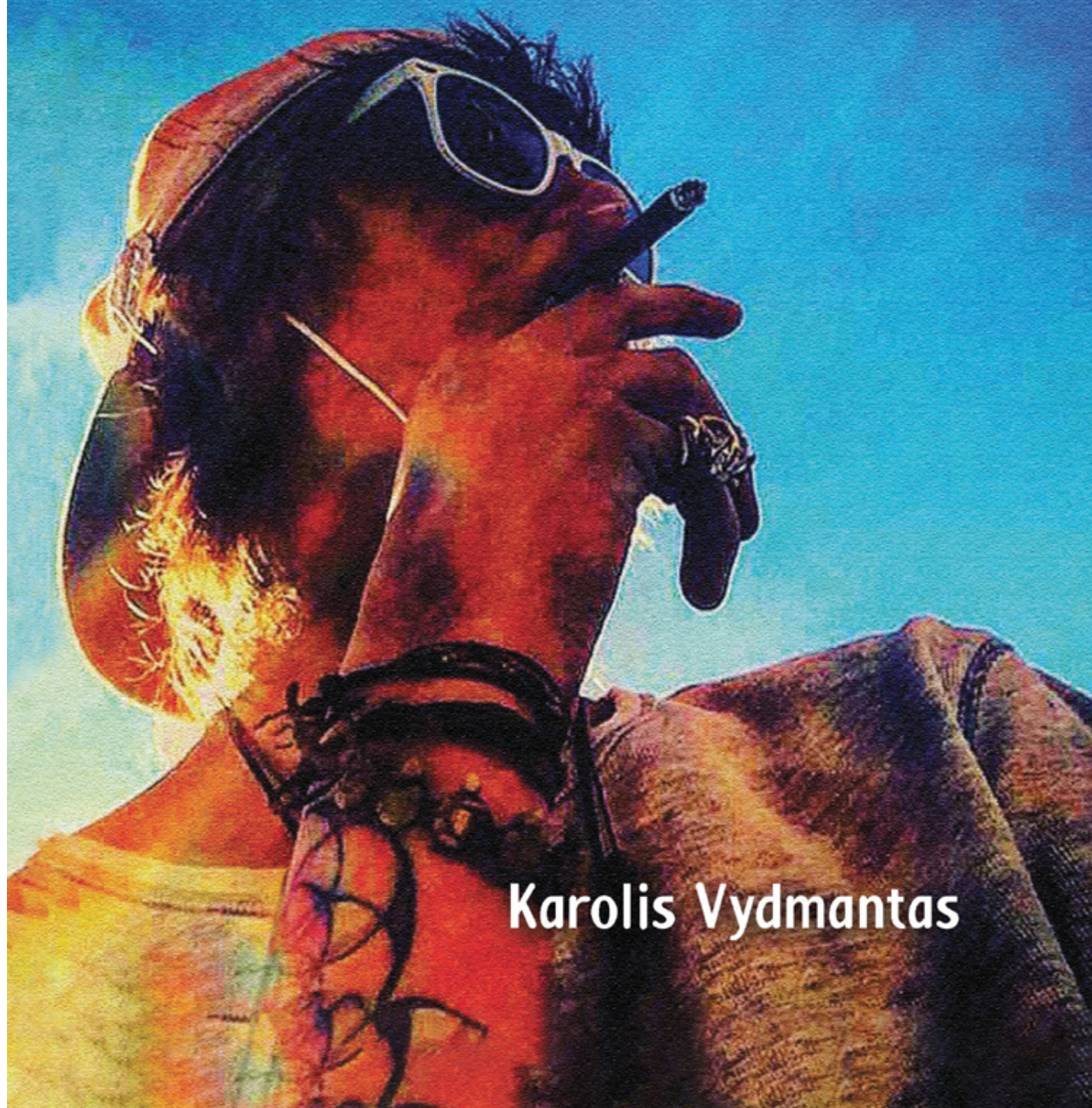


# Where is Karl?



Karolis Vydmantas

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Published in the United States by eBooks2go, Inc.  
1827 Walden Office Square, Suite 260,  
Schaumburg, IL 60173

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-5457-6419-0

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-5457-6422-0

eISBN: 978-1-5457-6420-6

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication

# Table of Contents

1. The Beginning
2. New Underground Generation (NUG)
3. Peppers
4. Will “Keep You” County
5. Bouncing Back
6. Weezy We
7. Emotional Rehab
8. Coming Back to the Burbz
9. Collecting Energies
10. Bad Things Come in 3’Z
11. Move to AZ?
12. Bisco Bound
13. Lost Tribe



## CHAPTER 1

# The Beginning

It all began with me coming to the United States as a four-year-old and getting dropped smack dab in the middle of the hustle and bustle of Chicago, Illinois, the Windy City. The only goal I had was to have fun and get money! Unfortunately for me, that was not what my life turned out like. Sometimes reality is a bit bleaker than everyone wants to admit.

This is my story.

I'll begin by coming here to a broken home. My father had beaten my mother back in Lithuania and had run off to America to get away from being drafted to fight against the Soviets back in 1998. He left my mother and me to fend for ourselves. Luckily, I had my grandparents, and they took care of me; those were some of my greatest memories. Not to say that my grandparents' generation didn't have their own crazy morals and issues. I remember my father and grandmother recollecting a memory of when my grandfather took out his own tonsils. According to them, he was in the kitchen, and he heated up two forks and a butter knife above the stove. When the forks were red hot, and while looking in the mirror hanging above the sink, he punctured and tore away his tonsils with the forks while using the butter knife to sear it shut. This guy was no one to fuck with. I always thought he set the bar a little high for how self-sufficient we had to be.

Not before long, though, the craziest/luckiest thing happened. My mom had won a green card. (And for those of you who don't know how that works, it's basically like the lottery to get a chance at a citizenship in the United States.) Now, because I was four at that time, around 1999, I had no knowledge of the English language, nor did I mind that I was going to a place far away from home. I was looking forward to maybe finding my dad.

My dad. He had left for America, hoping to find a career, success, and freedom just like everyone else.

With that being said, you can only imagine the type of life I was experiencing as a four-year-old with a single mother in rural Lithuania. Times were rough. She was always working, and I had to be somewhere, so she placed me in daycare.

She spent as much as she could applying for a green card so as to gain citizenship in the United States, and like a miracle, one day it came.

When we were on our way to America, I remember the flight being overwhelming. When we finally landed, we got into our distant family's car, and I threw up immediately. Nice first impression. Keep in mind, I was in close proximity to the only close family/friends I had out here. There was only my mom and this so-called distant family I had never met before. They kept their cool, but the drive wasn't as pleasant.

My mom somehow found a place in the heart of Cicero, a town right outside of Chicago and if you have any idea what that was like in the year 2000, you know what I was getting into at five years old. My mom ended up working at the Holy Cross Hospital. She always loved helping people. Unfortunately, she was just on clean-up duty and that didn't pay well. We were staying in a basement of a Mexican family's home, sleeping on mattresses on the floor. I made it fun. They had a son who taught me how to play on the very first Sega game console. We stayed for about a year until my mom saved up enough to move us out into an apartment in the suburbs, called Lemont. There was an established Lithuanian community there, and we had that distant family who lived there too. So we lucked out and I ended up attending a Lemont public school soon after. I had slightly caught on to English by then. Nonetheless, I somehow prevailed and was just like a member of American society, even if it was just in kindergarten. Li'l ol' me from a small town called Telsiai in Lithuania. I had some amazing times back then, having to attend a Lithuanian school every Saturday and join the basketball team and scouts. I was really doing things and staying as busy as possible while my mom was still commuting to Chicago every day for work. She straight up stole leftovers for us to eat because we were that broke.

I remember distinctly when my father showed back up into our lives. It seems like a dream now, but then it was the realest thing that had happened to me since the day I saw him last. I was playing out in the parking lot of this apartment complex just on the outskirts of downtown Lemont when he

pulled up in a white Jeep Cherokee. He made things right by my mom and me and came back into our lives. This was huge! We could get a place with all three of us.

It turned out, my dad had become a renowned carpenter and knew the trade pretty well. When he left Lithuania, he ended up in New Orleans building homes. He'd never done that before, and as he explained it, he used to work so hard his toes would bleed from being up on roofs all day without a harness. He made it back here, and it was all right. Eventually, he opened up his own company and started making more and more money. This turned into a whole slew of events.

I always walked to school too. It was way more fun. There'd always be a group of us that met up, and instead of taking the casual route, we'd end up on a trail next to the canal going through people's backyards, using it as a scenic shortcut to school. To be honest, those days were the ones I cherish most because I felt like I belonged in the community, and since I had been ripped from the last one, I wouldn't have to lose this one too. In the time I was there, I managed to make one long-term friend, and he stuck by my side through thick and thin. Around the same time, I left Lemont, so did he. We both ended up moving to a suburb even further into the barren suburbia where there were nothing but—plain fields.

My parents had bought a brand-new house, a nice little three bedroom at the end of a cul-de-sac in a nice little neighborhood off the lovely Route 59. This road, along with Highway 55 and Highway 80, had so much drug trafficking through Illinois that it was astounding to behold. At this point, I was starting the fourth grade and was the new kid on the block again; it was difficult. I managed to make a few friends and ended up running into my friend from Lemont! I knew his family had moved close, but by some miracle, both of our families had moved to the same school district!

I spent the rest of that year just making friends and having what could be called an average American child's experience, with a house and no Lithuanian community to lean on. It was just us. Things were still very tough though and not at all as glamorous as I made it seem to all my friends. We worked extra hard. I was typing up invoices and business emails as I was getting into middle school because my parents didn't know how to write in English. So you can only imagine what trying to get help with my homework was like. I was still attending a Lithuanian school every

Saturday, and homework and tests came with that too. I was still maintaining basketball and was starting to get into boxing. So my schedule was nothing short of packed. Since we still hardly had enough money for video games and other things, I decided to start stealing packs of gum from a local grocery store and selling them for a dollar a pack at school. It seemed futile only making a dollar a pack, but when you're in middle school and it's all profit, it adds up. Before I knew it, I had saved up a couple hundred bucks and I went to the nearest Game Stop after school and just cashed out on a bunch of video games. It was my own gift to myself. Obviously, my parents asked where these things came from. I could never tell them what I actually did to get these, so I lied, and it would be one of many. I told them my friend had sold his system and had given them all to me. To this day, I don't know how she believed me; the games were still all wrapped up fresh out of the store.

Of course, we used to do a bunch of nefarious things too. Car hopping was a phase, as was drinking 40 oz. beer and checking to see if the doors were unlocked in the cars parked throughout suburbia. It was a rush and the rewards were always nice too. It was never anything too major, just your usual packs/cartons of cigarettes and iPods. One time, I even found somebody's weed stash, bowl and all. That didn't last long though. One night I had decided I was going to go by myself; everyone had wussed out. Everything was going smoothly, but when I was walking up to this house with a pickup truck in the driveway, I noticed the lights were on upstairs. But I still risked breaking into their truck. At first they heard nothing and I managed to steal a carton of Marlboro Reds. Just as I was closing the driver's side door, the click it made when I was shutting it got the attention of the guys upstairs. From there, I immediately heard, "Did you hear that come from outside?" By that time, I was already sprinting full speed across the street. I didn't make it far before they were outside, and I was forced to jump over a fence and into someone's backyard. I noticed they had a shed in the back with some space behind it and a fence that was overgrown with weeds. I dove head-first into the space while I listened to two guys walk around with baseball bats looking for me. They eventually called the police, who in turn noticed that this wasn't the only car I had broken into, and now they had to get the whole neighborhood involved. They went door to door asking neighbors to check their backyards for a car hopper. By some grace of God, I waited it out and even fell asleep in those weeds. I woke up

covered in ants and welts but not in jail. I made my way out from there and walked my ass home. I never did that again.

It was toward the end of my middle-school career where my story really started to take off. The summer I was heading into high school was a real eye-opener for me. I was making friends outside of school in my neighborhood and was slowly becoming more and more of the person I envisioned myself being when I was growing up. Little did I know that things weren't going to go at all like I had planned, and in some ways, that may have been the best outcome. That summer I tried my first hit of pot and started smoking cigarettes, which by all logic I should have stayed away from. For some reason though, the rebellion in me had been building, and I was ready to burst.

My timing of this was impeccable because my mother had just had my little brother, a cool fourteen years apart. So now I was on baby duty, and if things didn't seem like they were on a downward spiral already, they had diagnosed my mom with stage 4 breast cancer. This rocked the whole boat I was calling life. With everything going on at home, I felt like a burden to my family and was constantly thinking of running away so I did, I ran away so many times that I was issued a court order to go to a psychologist in order to be deemed eligible for military school or be eligible to emancipate myself from my family so I could live on my own. (you can't be sent to military school without a felony as a minor) The psychologist determined she wanted a family session after coming to the fact I wasn't doing anything wrong & was just smoking pot. My parents didn't want to hear anything about that & were upset they weren't able to ship me off. So from then on no one called the police on me for not coming home & I was sort of able to do whatever it was I wanted. I had a fire lit in me, and I wasn't going to just "go to school." I needed to find a way to support myself and get out of the predicament I had found myself in. The solution? The NUG business.

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