

Never Shake Hands on the Bandstand

By Rob Tomaro

Contents

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Introduction	- Page 4
Jazz in the Jungle	- 5
My First (and Almost My Last)	- 11
Welcome to the Big Time	- 13
Slower, Slower	- 14
That's the Way...uh huh...uh huh...	15
Still Life: Three Coconuts with Scooter	- 18
Midnight on The Number 18	- 22
The Pterodactyl Egg	- 27
Foot Humor	- 30
Crunchy Granola	-- 34
Don't You Cry, Bo Peep. We will Find Your Sheep.	- 38
Pops Meets the Prezz	- 43
Lost in Translation	- 45
The King of the Screamers	-46
Nice Corsage	- 48
Everything's Coming up Marnie	- 49

Announcing the Next Course -	50
You're the Guitar Player They Sent Me? -	51
Taking the Big Hop -	52
Heidee, Heidee, Heidee, Ho!! -	53
Works of Art -	56
Tony Walks the Wire	57
Presto Chango. -	59
Jack Gets a Piece of the Cake -	60
Rio Bravo! –	61
Hi Ho the Derrio, the Groom Cuts the Cake	63
The Underbelly Tour of Eastern Europe -	65
The Sun'll Come Out, Tomaro! -	68
Uppercut	74
Just Feel it	77
When Pushkin Comes to Shovekin -	79
Duet -	84
Vashtau! -	86
Coltrane Barbie -	89
Paradigm Shift -	92
Notes From an Enraged Muppet -	94
We Must Find an Alternate Phrase -	96
Here's Lucy	101
Country and Western Night in Bucharest -	103

Frozianus Popsiculus Conductorus - 106

Miss Minelli Has Left the Building – 110

Second Best 113

Beauregard's Statue in the Moonlight - 116

The Ascension of the Archangel Rafael - 120

The Deadly Meatball Rumble -126

A Weekend at Casa Mayhem - 129

A Good Girl and a Bad Girl - 133

The Great Janesville Train Wreck - 135

335 TDC - The End is the Beginning - 138

Introduction:

(which is usually played as a solo, and comes before the downbeat)

I thought I was gonna be an actor, but something happened and I became a jazz guitarist, then a composer, then a symphony conductor. Yikes.

So, as you careen through this thing, you will find yourself in a number of disparate places; nasty dives and elegant movie star mansions, at a concert at Le Conservatoire Nationale de Paris, and in a street brawl outside a Wisconsin bar on a cold February night.

This stuff happened to me, to me and to people who told it to me.

Most of the people you will encounter here will never be on your TV, people like Billees Gregorees and Eric, the Yugoslavian punk musician, and the guy with the ashtray down his pants in Paris.

But they exist. They eke out a living in the interstices of show business; the party band circuit, the pits of Broadway, and in clubs and restaurants from Zagreb to Bucharest.

Very few get a bump up. Sometimes, though, the system squeezes someone out the top, like toothpaste. Edena Menzel got out.

One night she's standing next to me at a Bat Mitzvah, hopping around the stage singing "Quando, Quando, Quando". Next thing you know, they got her in green face paint singing "Defying Gravity" on Broadway. Yeah, sometimes someone gets squeezed out.

I wrote this 'cause I had to get these things out of my head, where they've been rolling around for years like marbles.

If the government ever found out how much fun I had writing this, they would make it illegal. I'd be doing hard time.

So, now that you've hung in this far, I guess you deserve to know what the title means. It's the first thing they tell you when you begin to work for a Wedding Band Agency. When an agent books a band at a wedding, he sells it to the client by saying the band they're hiring has "been together for ten years and rehearses once a week, so they're top notch".

What shows up at their wedding, though, is usually five guys and a girl who've never met before. And what's the first thing you do when you meet someone? That's right, so don't do it.

And now, here's the downbeat.

Jazz in the Jungle

Everything has to start somewhere. This begins here.

On the day I graduated Northwestern in 1973 with a degree in theater, my father took me to lunch. I took a deep breath and gave him the news:

"Dad, I actually don't want to go into acting right now. I want to be a jazz guitarist."

The old man didn't even look up from his Reuben.

“ Need some money for guitar lessons?”

He was like that. He was a different kind of cat from what you would expect from a guy who grew up poor on Gracie Street in Irvington.

“No, Pop, I’ll make it alright, but thanks. Thanks for putting me through Northwestern.”

“Hey. It kept you off the street for four years.”

I hooked up with a bunch of fellow starving jazz musicians. We had no idea what we were doing or where we were going, but we all worked like nuts to get there. Huddled in our little apartments, practicing Charlie Parker heads (melodies) frantically, like ten hours a day. Jazz monks.

We lived in a four block radius at the tip of Rogers Park in Chicago on a funky street called Jonquil Terrace, known around town as The Jungle. Four square blocks of junkies and jazzers in the shadow of the Howard Street El stop. My apartment cost \$130 a month. It was 1977.

Every six months, Dad came out to Chicago on business and we repeated the same ritual. Took me out for a steak, asked me if I needed anything, needed any dough, like that.

I wouldn’t take anything. I couldn’t. I guess I was in that period in life when it was important to make it on my own. I wanted to prove to him that I could, but I didn’t think of it in those terms at the time. I was just doing my thing,

Rode my bike out to Skokie and taught guitar at the Old Town School of Folk Music. Somehow, the rent got paid, but not by much. Bought a car for \$200. Dodge Coronet 440. Green, with one white door that didn’t open.

Before dinner, he’d always ask if we could swing by my apartment. He wanted to see where I lived. I’d always side step the request and say I was hungry, and we’d go eat.

One time, Dad put his foot down. He was determined to see my crib.

We got into a cab. When we got out in the Jungle in front of my building, I could see the storm clouds forming over my head:

“Jesus. Did I bring my kid up and pay for college so he could wind

up living in a shit hole?”

In my apartment was a mattress on the floor, a chair in front of a music stand, a record player with a Coltrane disc on it, and an electric guitar on a stand in the corner.

He looks around. Nods. Looks around some more.

“Robbie, what do you want to eat? Let’s go.”

He flies back to Jersey the next day.

Two days later, the doorbell rings. Big guy standing there in a Sears uniform., with a clipboard.

“You Robert Tomaro?”

I’m blinking and yawning. It’s like, eight A.M.

“Yeah”

“Sign here. (turns and calls out) Up here, guys!”

There’s a truck blocking the street. . Four guys emerge from it and begin carrying stuff into my crib.

They bring in a bed, a sofa, a TV, two easy chairs, a dresser, a mirror, a dinette set and a bunch of other stuff. Two minutes later they were gone.

I stood there, paralyzed. I didn’t know where I was. Instant middle class apartment with all the accoutrements. Just add water. Voila!

My Old Man, what can you say?

Did my usual summer gig as a minstrel at the Gurnee Renaissance Fair. Got paid \$35 a day to wander around in a jester’s costume. Hey, nonny nonny, the wind and the rain.

While strolling (which is playing and walking around at the same time) at a Medieval feast, I exchange business cards with a piano player.

Two months later, I get a call from him. Tells me the Broadway composer Cy Coleman is auditioning cats for onstage musician roles for the Chicago company of a show of his that’ on Broadway. It’s called “ I

Love My Wife”.

The eerie hand of fate clutches my spine.

Flash back to last Christmas, when I flew back to Jersey to visit the fam. My sister gets the idea that, instead of buying mom and dad more stuff, why don't we take them out to a Broadway show? Great. But, the only night we could do it before I flew back to Chicago was a Monday night and every show on Broadway was dark on Monday but one, something called “I Love My Wife”.

As the curtain opens, four guys come out and do the opening number, called “Friends.” The show is set in New Jersey and these guys all grew up together and were now furniture movers in Trenton. They wore Allied Van Lines furniture mover uniforms. Bass, drums, guitar and piano.

I knew the cat on guitar. Michael Mark. We graduated from Northwestern at the same time. Hadn't seen him since that day. Dig that. Now here he is on Broadway. Good for you, Mike. You stepped in shit (got lucky).

Next thing I thought was: “Hmm. I could do that part”. In fact, if I did a little mental squint, I could sort of actually see myself doing that part.

Flash forward to August, I'm still on the phone with the piano player.

“Rob, you should call the Stage Manager at the Drury Lane Water Tower Place Theatre. Coleman is looking for a singing, acting, jazz guitar player. He's auditioned, like, a hundred cats so far, man.”

I call Tom Guerra, the Production Stage Manager. Describe myself and what I do, theater training and all that.

“My God.... Can you get down here, like immediately? Cy is leaving for New York in forty five minutes.”

I grab my ax and bolt. Look. for my car. Then, I realize that my buddy Mark had asked to borrow it for the afternoon. Shit.

I sprint to the Howard El stop.

My heart is pounding. I can feel, freaking feel down to my toes that this part is mine. I don't care how many other cats he's seeing, this shit is mine. Fate's freaky hand is squeezing my backbone like I owe him

money.

I look at my watch. We're coming up to the stop at Clark and Division. I'll just make it to the theater.

Then, the el train screeches to a halt fifty feet from the stop. Cat comes over the intercom. "We are being delayed. There is a medical emergency onboard and EMS has been called. Thank you for your patience."

That's it. I'm screwed.

Ten minutes later, we pull in. I careen wildly eastward to Michigan avenue. I blast through the doors of the theatre, into the cool, darkened auditorium. Still blinded by the change in light, I can just make out Cy Coleman, who is standing and grabbing his brief case as he prepares to leave.

Tom Guerra: "Cy, do you have time for one more? I think you should hear this young man."

Cy says make it quick and I jump onstage and plug in to a little amp.

I'm drenching in sweat, can't catch my breath. And I can't think of one damn thing to play. I finally manage to do, like, a solo guitar version of "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat" by Charlie Mingus,

Cy's eyebrows go up. "Sing something"

Can't think of a damn thing. And then, I got like a mental twitch. Before I can stop myself, I blurt out the beginning of madrigal ballad from the Renaissance Fair. "The Turtle Dove."

"Fare thee well, my dear I must be gone
and leave thee for a while.
But I'll never forget the one that I love,
So....please give me a smile"

Yes, I actually manage to screw up the lyrics and the scansion and just about everything else.

Cy's looking at me like I'm nuts. Did this kid think he's auditioning for Romeo and Juliet? But he's not actually frowning. Then, he splits.

I get a call from Guerra a week later. Cy's back. Wants me to

prepare some specific stuff and audition again. I had actually been called back.

For the next two months, I did four more call back auditions for Cy Coleman. The tension, the not knowing what was gonna happen with this, was killin' me.

At one point, Guerra calls me. I had a beard at the time. Cy wants to know if I would consider shaving it off if I got the part.

"Tom, please inform Mr. Coleman that I would consider shaving every hair offa my whole feakin' body if I got the part."

The tension was getting to my Dad, too. He insisted on being kept in the loop about everything. All the drama, the call backs, everything.

When I got the call from Guerra informing me that I had been cast as Stanley, the guitar playing furniture mover from Trenton, I knew that my life had just changed, changed forever.

I called Dad. He was in his office at the Remco Toy factory. He was the Vice President of the company. He seemed happy and relieved that the damn drama was finally over. "You did good, Rob. You hung in there and you did good."

Years later, my Uncle Johnny, Dad's younger brother, told me he was in the office with him when I called that day. Said Dad hung up the phone and just sat at his desk and cried. Johnny said he had never seen Dad cry before or since.

I went from making \$50 a week to signing a contract for \$1500 a week.

Rehearsals began two weeks later. A week before the show opens, known as hell week, 'cause everything that can go wrong usually does, the whole cast and crew is in a particularly stressful rehearsal. People are yelling at each other. We're on our second director. Cy fired the first one last week.

In the of middle of a screaming match between Guerra and the jackass lighting guy, who can't seem to understand why there shouldn't be a shadow across Marcia McClain's face at this point, there's a knock at the stage door, a loud, insistent knock.

Everything stops. Guerra opens the door. Guy brings in three cases of champagne on a hand truck. Note on top. "Good luck on

opening night. Best wishes, Pat Tomaro”, My old man, what can I say?

He flies out for opening night with my mom and my sister. There's a picture of me in the lobby. Dad walks over to it. Nods. Smiles.

We go to the Water Tower Place indoor mall. Jody and mom disappear into a store and Dad and I are leaning over the railing looking down at the atrium two floors below. He starts telling me that he's considering taking a consulting position in Florida, chucking the New York rat race and taking it a little easier, but it's up in the air 'cause mom doesn't want to leave her friends and on and on like that.

And suddenly I realize this is the first time we've had a normal adult conversation like a couple of guys standing around talking. Dig that.

Two months later, I come back to the crib at midnight. Week before Christmas and I was at a cast party. Had a few drinks.

The light was beeping on my primitive answering machine. Fake mahogany case. Reel to reel tape.

It was my sister. Dad had a stroke putting up Christmas lights in front of the house. In a coma at St. Barnabas.

Caught the first thing smoking out of O'Hare.

He was brain dead. On a respirator. My mother was non-functioning. Couldn't stop crying. After three days, it fell to me to make the decision to turn off the machines. Jody and I knew that was Dad's wish. He'd actually spoken about it to her years before, if anything like that should ever happen to him. Didn't make it any easier.

But he got to see me up on that stage. He got to see me sing and act and play the guitar in a Broadway show (on Michigan Avenue but what the hell. It's close enough for Rock and Roll).

After the run at the Drury Lane, I moved back to New York and got the National Tour of the show starring the Smothers Brothers. I did companies of that show throughout the '80s in Coconut Grove, Detroit, Cleveland. All over.

Not long after Dad passed away I had a dream about him. In the dream, I was asleep in my apartment and I heard a car honking its horn outside on Jonquil. I got up and went outside. There, parked in front of my building was the cab that dropped Dad and me off that night when he visited the place. As I approached it, the front passenger side door sort of floats open and I look inside. Dad's behind the wheel. He's got a huge

grin on his face and he's holding something out to me, something he wants to give me. It's a gold lame Elvis suit on a white satin hanger. . He's holding it in his right hand and extending it out of the car to me. Doesn't say anything. Just smiles.

Then, I woke up.

What can I tell you.? He was a different kind of cat.

My first (and Almost My Last)

Finagled my way into the studio of the best jazz guitar teacher in Chicago, Jack Cecchini. He hipped me early on to the truth: "Kid, you'll starve trying to

do only jazz dates. Learn the wedding band shit and at least you'll make rent."

So, we embarked upon a crash course in the specious world of wedding band repertoire. Following Jack's guidance, I got a huge blue vinyl three hole punch binder with colored alphabetical tabs. A quick flip to the letter "I", for example, and I would be ready to play any of the charts that might be called on the stand: "Ipanema" "I've Got You Under My Skin" "I Got it Bad and that Ain't Good" Like so.

A perfect system. Especially, since I hadn't been playing long enough to memorize the tunes, so I really needed those charts.

So, Jack is preparing me for my first gig. Got the binder, got the tux, got one each of the requisite ruffled shirts (one blue, one white). Jack pulls a few strings. Phone rings. It's the Jerry Ross office. Huge. Ton of work. All the big society parties. I'm on the gig this Saturday. Fancy downtown hotel.

I'm all set. I get there early. Set up. The band filters in. All Chicago heavy hitters. Drummer is freakin' Shelly Plotkin off of The Siegel - Schwall Blues Band. I had seen them a million times. Huge stars in Chicago.

We tune up. Turns out the band has been together for years, really actually a band that has played together for years. These cats can read each others minds.

The leader nods. Shelly does a four bar bossa intro and the band launches into "Summer Samba". But nobody tells me. Nobody says a word. No hand signs for keys and absolutely no time between tunes. They're playing and I'm flipping like nuts through the tabs on my book with my pick stuck into my mouth protruding like a dummy's plastic tongue.

By the time I find the tune, they're practically done. Also, nobody told me that these bands don't really do tunes from start to finish. If they start a bossa, they will play about half of it then segue into four additional bossas to keep the dancers on the floor, which is what they're there to do.

They move into "Dindi" which I have, but it's in the wrong key. They switch to a tune I've never heard, so I just stand there like the town mute in that Mockingbird movie with Gregory Peck, only I ain't playing the Gregory Peck part. I'm the tard standing in the corner of the chick's bedroom.

Everyone's body language and raised eyebrows are enough to tell me I'm stinkin' up the joint.

I finally find myself in sync with the rest of the band. The piano player nods to me in the middle, which means to take a solo. But I'm so panicked that I

just freeze. God knows what I played. It sounded like shit. It didn't sound like Duke Ellington. It sounded like Puke Ellington, his slightly retarded nephew from the Mockingbird movie.

Every time I had to stop playing to flip through my book (which I now hated), I stuck my pick in my mouth. I wished it was a stick, like the kind they give to epileptics to keep them from swallowing their tongues.

At the first break, the band eased away from me and went into a corner. They were muttering under their breath and glancing at me. The rest of the night, they slid around me and no one made eye contact. I was like a guy who has a turd on his shoulder and no one has the heart to tell him.

I sat by myself in the corner with a paper plate filled with Swedish meatballs on toothpicks. I gummed the food. Everything tasted like sand, but it least it was a prop. At least it kept me from gouging my freakin' eyes out in shame.

The gig ended and I bolted for the door. No one said goodbye. As I climbed into the driver's seat of my 1967 Dodge Coronet 440 (all white with a green door that didn't open), I leaned my head on the driving wheel. I had sweated completely through my new blue shirt and my new wool tuxedo. Flop sweat has its own piquant aroma, like the smell issuing from the bed of a plague victim.

I could feel what was happening. The phone lines were lighting up all over Chicago. Burning down the line. Lighting up and frying pigeons perched on the transformers.

The word was going out not to hire me under any circumstances. I stunk. That was it. My career was over. Shortest career in the history of show business. I showed up and got the business. I wept. I gasped. I shook. I finally calmed down enough to kick the Coronet into gear and oozed back up to the North Side.

I licked my wounds and learned the tunes. I showed my face on another gig in a couple of months and did better, not great, but better. And that's how it goes. You take your licks. You hit and miss. Eventually, you hit more than you miss.

A thousand club dates later and I'm the grizzled veteran. And when a kid shows up, wet behind the ears, doesn't know shit from Shinola, I give him a break. I give him a leg up. That was me, once.

Welcome to the Big Time

Had been doing club dates and party work for about six months. Studying jazz guitar and trying hard to get my mind around all the chords and tunes and stuff you had to know. Had a long way to go and I knew it.

Got a call from an agent, who spoke in the typical Morse code patois of agents who have to make hundreds of these calls all day:

"Kid, Saturday night, you're at the Ambassador East, main ballroom. Eight o'clock start. You'll meet the leader on the job. Blue shirt."

In the seventies, bands performed in either powder blue or white ruffled shirts and tuxedos. It was important to know which one was required on what job, for obvious reasons.

I showed up early, around seven o'clock. I entered the main ballroom of the Ambassador East hotel in downtown Chicago. The place was decked out in astonishing opulence. Huge pictures of a birthday honoree hung from the gilded walls and chandeliers. It was the 75th birthday party for Ray Kroch, the founder of MacDonald's. No expense had been spared. The party was super sized.

The stage was set up for a jazz big band. White music stands and chairs. I climbed up, found the stand with the guitar player book on it and sat down. I opened it up: "Property of Freddie Green".

I gasped and dropped it like it was a snake. Freddie Green was the legendary guitarist for the Count Base Orchestra. He practically invented a whole style of swing rhythm guitar playing in that genre. I was actually gonna be subbing for Freddie Green on the Count Basie Band. Furiously, I began flipping through the charts. Speed reading through the chords symbols, I realized with a deep gulp of panic that I knew how to play about one chord out of every five, as my lessons with Jack hadn't included the rest.

How I was going to fake my way through this? Can you imagine being thrown off the bandstand by Count Basie at Ray Kroch's birthday party?

Just as I was really beginning to lose it, I heard a voice from below the bandstand. "Kid, what the hell you doing? Get down from there."

It was the leader I was told to meet. Turns out I was booked to be in a quartet playing the cocktail hour set before Basie came on. Gratefully and

sheepishly, I grabbed my guitar and crawled down to the floor in front of the bandstand. Welcome to the Big Time.

Slower, Slower

I had a rock trio booked at a truck stop/bar out on Rte. 75 in downstate Illinois around 1976. No stage, just a couple of lights trained on a corner of the room. Truckers in jeans, boots and John Deere hats. Their girls in the their Saturday night best.

The owner was Greek and doubled as the cook. His son was behind the bar.

Things were going good. Got a good crowd up dancing and we launched into "Honky Tonk Woman" by the Stones, a sure fire dancers' favorite. Then, about two minutes into the song, the owner comes storming out of the kitchen in his apron and yells at me: "Slower, slower!!" Then, he disappears into the kitchen again.

I turned to the drummer, who clearly heard him as well, and we continued the tune, but at a bit slower tempo.

Then about a minute later, the kitchen doors fly open and the owner appears again and this time he's furious. "Slower, slower!!"

Confused and panicky, we slowed the damn thing down again. Now the tempo was roughly commensurate with that of the funeral march from the Beethoven Eroica symphony. "I met agin soaked.....barroomqueen...in.....mem.....phis."

The whole time this was happening, the bewildered dancers kept trying to keep pace with the deceleration of the tune, dancing slower and slower. In the murky light, through the Marlboro haze, they looked like performers in some twisted underwater ballet.

Then, the son of the owner walks over and, literally, pulls the plug. The band grinds to a halt and we were told to get out. I knew enough not to ask questions in a tough place like that, so we skedaddled.

I later found out that the owner spoke very little English. He thought we were playing too loud. He thought he was saying: "Softer, softer!!"

That's the Way... uh huh...uh huh...

October of 1975. Got a call from a drummer who had some work on the road. All's we had to do is put together a band. Already had a singer. Strange chick with bad teeth from Holland Hills, some non descript tract suburb far south of Chciago.

Sang good, but strange. Spoke with a thick cockney accent. But she was from freakin' Holland Hills. Convinced herself she was English. Whoa.

Cat needed a bass player, so I call my buddy Gary Sinise. Yeah, I know, but back then he was a twenty two year old bass player, and a good one. Sang, too, so he gets the call.

Our uniform was polyester shirts with a little triangles on them. They were all similar. Gary called them "our similar shirts." Things were butt ugly, I swear. Welcome to the age of disco.

We played every funky joint in Illinois. We'd didn't miss a one. Macomb, Sterling, Galena. I turned to Gary one night.. It was May 22nd and the clock was about to strike midnight. I was about to turn 25 years old on the stage of the Red Lane Bowling Alley and Grill in Effingham, Illinois"

"Gary, you got to promise me somethin', man. Please don't let me turn 26 on the stage of the Red Lane Bowling Alley and Grill in Effingham, Illinois"

“Gotcha covered, Rob. No way.”

We were so bored that we’d do stuff like this: Gary and me would put on pink plastic glasses that had slinkys attached to the eye pieces with eyeballs hanging off the end of the slinkys.

Then, we’d walk up to the mics, shake our heads slowly back and forth and sing: “That’s the Way I Like It” by KC and the Sunshine Band with thick Prussian accents. We thought this was hilarious. Apparently, though, our audience of downstate cowboys and their molls failed to see the humor.

After a few months of this noise, we were driving back to Chi from Sterling one frozen February night in my 440.

“Rob, what do you think, man? I’ve about had it,”

“Yeah, man, it’s gotten old. What are you gonna do?”

“Bunch of friends from college want to put together a theater company.”

“Cool. Call me when you get a play up.”

Next summer, I get the call. Gary and his pals are doing their first play. I pick up my girlfriend, the lovely and talented actress Mary Ross, and we go to this church in Highland Park on the North Shore.

Sign on the door in magic marker on a piece of cardboard from a dry cleaner package: “Steppenwolf Theater Company.” Little magic marker arrow pointing down a flight of stairs to the basement.

Mary gives me this look. Yikes.

Walk into a small rec room. Molded blue plastic chairs. No stage. Little area in a corner over which someone had focused a few Maxwell House Coffee cans they had turned into stage lights.

Kid comes around with mimeographed programs. The ink’s still wet.

“An Evening of One Act Plays:

The Indian Wants the Bronx – by Israel Horovitz
The Lover – by Harold Pinter

Mary leans over and hisses at me: “Jeez, Rob, how embarrassing is

this shit gonna be? You owe me a good dinner for draggin' me to this."

Lights come up on the "stage."

John Malkovich walks out wearing a turban. He is an Indian who gets beaten up at a bus stop by a bunch of punks as he is trying to catch a bus to the Bronx. The punks were played by Gary, Jeff Perry, and Terry Kinney.

About two minutes into it, I'm, like, pole axed because it's stunning. Watching Malkovich onstage was what it must have been like to walk into a Broadway house in 1947 and see Brando in "Streetcar." Nothing could have prepared you for that. Or this.

I look at Mary. Her mouth is hanging open.

Play ends. Mary turns to me. Can't even talk.

Then, Jeff Perry comes out with Laurie Metcalf and they do "The Lover," a dark little twisted psychodrama. Very English. Also great.

Next thing I know, Steppenwolf is the biggest thing to hit the Chicago Theater scene since Vaudeville.

A few years later, I'm living in NYC. I go to see Gary and Malkovich do "True West" by Sam Shepherd at the tiny Cherry Lane theater in the Village. Harrowing piece about two brothers who undergo a violent and wrenching role reversal. The timid one turns into the aggressive one and vice versa. By the end of the play, they've trashed the set and the audience is completely emotionally wrung out.

Gary and I go out to dinner afterwards. Neither of us say nothin', but we both know he's gonna be a star very soon, but he's cool. He's still that guy that thinks it's funny to sing disco with slinky eyeballs on.

"Forest Gump" did the trick. Brilliant. Lieutenant Dan with no legs opposite Tom Hanks.

In 2004, I get a call from WGN TV in Chicago. Gary gave an interview and was asked if he ever did any recording back in his bass player days. The only thing he could remember was playing in the band on a cast album for a musical I wrote called "Wisemen". The TV producer wanted me to FedEx the album cover down to them to use as an insert, 'cause there was a picture of Gary on the front. I did.

Never know what you're gonna find when you show up somewhere to support your pal's gig. Could be crap. Could be ground zero for the blast off of

a new chapter in the American Theater.

Show Biz.

“Everything about it is appealing..!”

“That’s the way....uh huh...uh huh.... I like it!!”

Still Life: Three Coconuts with Scooter

In January of 1977, my pal Gary Kleiner and I set off to India on a spiritual quest to visit the tomb of Meher Baba, a guru whose teachings helped us get through the craziness of the '60s.

We set off from Chicago on Pan Am on the first leg bound for London. I had my acoustic six string with me, as I had been offered a gig with the Poona Radio All Stars when I got to India. But first I had to get my ax there in one piece. No mean feat at the time.

I immediately got into it with the Pan Am steward, who informed me that I had to check it and stow it down below. I explained that, being poor, I couldn't afford a hard shell case and had it in a soft gig bag, and that it would be reduced to matchsticks by the time it was off loaded in London if I had to stow it below. After a heated argument, I managed to wheedle my way into sticking it in a coat rack thingy in first class.

We changed to British Air at Heathrow, bound for Paris, and the saga continued. The officious Brit head steward refused to hear of accommodating me and I really had to pour on the charm with great unction to convince him to let me stick it somewhere on the plane. So, I managed to make it to Paris with it in one piece.

By some weird vagary of international travel at the time, we had a two day layover en Paris. Arriving at Charles De Gaulles airport for the final leg to Bombay on Air France, I decided to assault the walls of protocol head on, this time..

I boarded the plane with my guitar, strode up to the first French steward I could find and got aggressive. He stood directly in my path, resplendent in a matching burgundy polyester cravat and vest ensemble.

"Alright, what do you want me to do with this?"

He looked at my guitar like it was a bag of offal, waved his wrist in the air and said, in a spot on Pepe Le Pew accent: "How should I know, it's your guitar, isn't it?" And walked away.

But this story is about what happened in Paris, during the layover.

We disembarked from London, eager to explore the City of Light for two days, a free vacation courtesy of Air France.

I told the taxi driver to take us to a cheap hotel. We end up in the fourth arrondissement, called Le Marie, site of the famous cemetery which is the final resting place for everyone from Rousseau to Jim Morrison.

We dumped our stuff in the flea bag and hit the town. After wolfing down the cheapest meal we could find, we set out to find the secret heart of Paris after dark.

As we didn't know anything about Paris, we didn't do anything, and wound up wandering down the dog island in the middle of the Champs Elysees at one in the morning, feckless and clueless, but happy as clams. We were, after all, free men in Paris, like Joanie Mitchell said.

Time to head back to the flea bag. Our plane was due to depart very early. We found a Metro entrance, and, (welcome to Paris, rubes), discovered, to our deep consternation, that the Metro shuts down at midnight.

So, we try hailing a cab. Nothing. We were invisible. Cab after cab passed us by. It's now past two in the morning and we're exhausted. What to do?

Just then, this cat on a vespa motor scooter roars up onto the dog island.

"Hey, chaps. What's up?"

Turns out he was an engineering student, studying most of the time in London. He had the craziest accent I've ever heard. Straight down the middle between Rive Gauche Parisian and Cockney, but weird, like , Stanley Holloway Cockney out of My Fair Lady.

"Had a good night, tonight, chaps, I've just been to Maxim's., Great show, there."

By way of demonstrating his bona fides, he extracts a huge ceramic ashtray from the crotch of his Sergio Valente jeans with "Maxim's" stamped on the thing in bold relief. It was then that I realized he was drunk.

Gary and I looked at each other. What the hell?

"Look, man, we're in a bit of a pickle. We have to make it back to our hotel and we're stuck."

"No worries, mate. Hop on and I'll have your there in half a tick."

Another furtive look passes between me at Gary. Is it even possible for us all to fit on this thing? But our options had telescoped down to nothing, so we all climbed onboard.

Gary wedged himself behind the guy, with his hands wrapped around his belly. I followed suit, my ass hanging off the rear tail light and bumper, my arms around Gary. We looked like the Three Stooges in some filthy circle jerk routine.

He jams the thing and it leaps off the dog island. We're roaring down the Boulevard at a crazy pace. Then, he begins pointing out the sights, our very own twisted tour guide. The inebriated midnight gringo tour of Paris.

"And here is the Tuileries and here is the Obelisk, and here is...."

And he begins running red lights at about fifty miles an hour.

Gary, who is pretty tightly wrapped to begin with, is pleading with him to slow down.

Five minutes and three blown lights later: " And here is the Eiffel, and here is the Obelisk...."

I shout into Gary's ear: "Oh, man, this guy is nuts. We're going in circles. We got to get off."

Truth be told, it really didn't matter what direction we were going in, because Lewis and Freakin' Clark had totally forgotten the name of their hotel and the address. Free men in Paris.

We approach a red light. On the south side are four lanes of cars, revving up and ready to bolt into the intersection. Our chauffeur, Toulouse Le Jerkwad, rams the throttle forward and tries to slide through the box before Le Mans begins five yards to the right. We didn't stand a chance.

The bike enters the intersection at around forty five miles an hour. The first lane of cars misses us in front. The last lane of cars slips by the back. And a huge black Peugeot slams into us at the bike's rear tire, like six inches from Gary's leg.

The vespa is launched into the air like the space shuttle. And then, in the way these things are perceived, everything slows down.

I remember looking around as I floated through the air. I seemed to be occupying my own orbit, a lazy arc that drifted up about fifty feet. As I reached its apex, I executed a perfect tour jete, a three hundred and sixty degree turn, which afforded me a brief but charming view of the skyline of Paris. Then, I paused in mid air, like Nijinsky.

It was then that I noticed Gary fifteen feet beneath me, orbiting the earth

in a slighter tighter arc. He is flailing away as he drifts through space, and beneath him, Jerky Nut Case is tumbling ass over croissant, holding the handle bars of the vespa in a death grip.

Everything comes to earth at once. I bounce to a stop. I realize nothing is broken. My ass is chapped and I can't breath, though.

Gary standing beneath a poplar tree. His brand new French designer pants are ripped from the crotch to the cuff. He is jumping up down and screaming: "This can't be happening!! This can't be happening!!"

Jerkwad is wrapped around some wrought iron statuary of Louis the XIV. His bike looks like it was suddenly re- designed by Salvador Dali. Voila!! He is shaken but apparently unhurt.

I rush over to Gary, stop him hopping about and say, very firmly: " Gary, the gendarmerie will be here in one minute. We have no money and no passports. Do you understand me?"

His eyes focus and I drag him around the corner. I throw him into a cab and berate the driver, who is reading the late edition of the International Times, to please, please, get us the hell out of there.

As we turn the corner away from the intersection, I see the Parisian cops converging on ashtray boy, who is weaving and bobbing and coming up with God knows what crazy story.

The next day, we make it to the plane. Ah, Paris. City of Light!! City of Romance!!

Midnight on The Number 18

So, we're on the last leg of our odyssey to India. Made it past the Sirens, which weren't beautiful temptresses in our case. They were the sirens of the gendarmerie.

Slept most of the way. But you could gauge where you were by the floor show that would occur whenever we made a stop.

Plane stops in Hamburg and two huge burghers in immaculate periwinkle overalls appear holding the largest industrial vacuum cleaner in captivity. Turn this thing on. It's engine whines and shrieks. Clearly, it is outraged by the untidiness it finds in the cabin.

It sucks up everything that's not nailed down. I'm sure some poor slumbering shlub lost a shoe to its hungry maw. Give up the shoe, man. This

thing must be appeased.

Wake up again in Karachi. Two very tiny old ladies in Saris come on. Look like they just walked out of a Mother Teresa look alike contest. They begin gently pushing dust around on the floor with little sheaves of twigs someone long ago had fashioned into brooms. Different strokes.

Plane door opens in Bombay (yeah, I know. But I still can't stop thinking of it as Bombay). Sudden inrush of thick, viscous hot air. The musk of Mother India wraps itself around you in your seat. The fetid, wonderful oxygen stew. The reek of five thousand years of jasmine and dung. Nothing smells like India.

And nothing prepares you for India. The squalor and the splendor. The splendor in the squalor. Riotous stalks of purple Bougainvillea growing out of the roofs of mud huts. Legless mother rolls up to you on a filthy skateboard, holding a baby and screaming: "Baksheesh!! Baksheesh, Sahib!!!"

Our destination is the tomb of Meher Baba, a hundred and fifty miles inland. Over the Deccan Plateau to Poona. Then, south into the Maharashtra to the little town of Ahmednagar. Baba's tomb is there.

We engage a paper taxi to get us to Poona. It's a Godrej Ambassador, a domestic beater made from the blueprints of the failed Fiat 260. Fiat palmed the design off on the Godrej company when they realized the car was shit. Godrej made thousands of them. They suck. But it's a car. In India.

The paper taxi has thousands of copies of today's Times of India strapped precariously to the roof, bound for newsstands in Poona. Hence, paper taxi.

The driver and I get into it about my guitar, just like with the Pan Am steward. Cat wants to strap my ax on top of the papers on the roof. Only way I can dissuade him is to agree to hold it between my legs the whole way. It's a seven hour drive to Poona.

Breaks down twice. Once, at two in the morning high in the Deccan Plateau. Driver's leaning into the engine with a file, a patch and a jar of rubber cement, shoring up the air hose with a tire repair kit from a 1948 Schwinn bicycle.

We make it to Ahmednagar. We bow down at the tomb of Meher Baba. I cry. I've come around the world to do this. It took five minutes. Worth all of it. Everything we've been through.

Next day I go to the movies. Line up at the Sarosh Cinema. Pay my 25 rupees. The film is showing non-stop for three days. Hot out of Bollywood, a re-make of Zorro, set in India in the 19th century.

Whenever Zorro faces a difficult decision, he prays to a statue of Lakshmi, the goddess with all the arms. As he prays, he sings.

On a little table behind the statue, you can see a plastic colored light wheel. It is exactly the same as the one my family had under our Christmas tree. Has different colored gels, whirling around, lit by a from behind, the colors flashing and changing across Lakshmi's face as she gravely considers Zorro's entreaty.

The thing the audience loved the most was when the director would make the film go backwards. Zorro is sword fighting Sergeant Garcia's men on top of a roof. He leaps off the roof to escape and lands unhurt in the plaza fifteen feet below. But wait, he is accosted by more guards. No problem. The film goes backwards and Zorro floats back up to the roof. Crowd goes wild. Wild. Show it again!

The fat, lazy Sergeant Garcia is sloughing off in the shade eating a banana when he's supposed to be on guard. We see the banana disappear down his corpulent throat. He practically inhales it.

Suddenly, the Commandant appears and delivers a blistering tongue lashing in a local Marathi dialect, words flying out of his mouth like out of a machine gun. The Commandant leaves. In order to demonstrate how unnerved this makes Garcia, the film, once again, goes backwards and the banana slides up out of his throat, completely pristine and whole. Audience goes nuts. Can't get enough of it!! Show it again!!!

Come out of the cinema and cross the dirt road to the filthy local café, the Sarosh Canteen (Sarosh must have bought up all the low rent property like the cheap stuff on Monopoly)

Seated at a little out door table sipping a Lime Rickey, I see a guy come around from the bakery in back. He is holding about twelve loaves of hot bread, still stuck together in one huge slab. He goes to the door of his delivery truck, but he's forgotten to open it. No problem. He puts the bread on the ground, right on top of a pile of water buffalo dung, opens the doors, puts the bread into the van, drives off. Puts me right off my Lime Ricky. Welcome to India.

Go to a restaurant. Order a rice pilaf. Sit two tables down from a huge Sikh in a greasy purple turban with his beard in a net tucked up under his chin. His pilaf comes. Consumes the thing like someone's about to steal it. Both hands shoveling it in. All ten tubby digits digging into the mound of rice and lamb chunks.

Finishes. Burps. Looks around. No napkin. No problem. Reaches over

to a conveniently placed window curtain and wipes his hands on it for about five minutes. Puts me right off my pilaf. What can you do? It ain't the George VI.

Staying at the Meher Baba Ashram and practicing for my gig the next night. I have been invited to play with the Poona Radio Allstars.

I'm burning through some Charlie Parker licks trying to get my chops up. Cat comes up to me. Padri. That's the nickname Baba gave him. Real name is Feradoon Driver. Whole families were often named after the profession of the father during the British Raj.

"Rob, Mohammed likes the sound of the guitar. Calls it the tin-tin. Come and play for him. He will enjoy it."

It's a great honor. Mohammed is a Mast (pronounced: must) a saint whose consciousness is, supposedly, merged into the sixth plane of super reality, which is the domain of the over – mind, the domain of universal thought. Mohammed doesn't read your mind. Mohammed is merged with your mind and everyone else's.

I approach Mohammed, who is seated hunched over on a little iron cot, which he rarely leaves. Padri, who is Mohammed's attendant, stands next to the saint and motions for me to sit about twenty feet away on a chair.

I begin to play. Start to pick up speed. Roaring my way through "Ornithology" then "Scrapple from the Apple"

I stop and look up.

Mohammed chuckles softly and turns to Padri. Utters one word with a giggle: "Mee – yat!"

Padri, with a huge smile, says: "He says you're mad."

Mohammed, again. A little louder: "Mee- yat. Mee-yat!!"

"He says you're double mad."

Outdoor concert that night with the Poona Radio All Stars. A father and five sons. Father plays the sitar, oldest boy plays the vina. The remaining three sons come out one at a time playing Tabla solos (the little Indian hand drums).

The youngest one, must have been seven, the father saves 'till last. Tyke comes out and just kills it. Nails it. Audience goes apey. It's all beaming out on Radio India, across the Deccan to the coast and to the South.

“Now, it is time for our American guest artist... all the way from States, sir. All the way from She.... Caw...gu!”

I had been practicing for this for months. My idol, the English jazz Guitarist John McLaughlin, had put out a record with an Indian Classical ensemble like this one, called Shakti. He played the guitar like Coltrane played the sax. Million notes at a blistering speed. Threw in some Indian scales. Fantastic. So, I had been copping his shit for months. I was loaded for bear. I was gonna wail with the All Stars.

Get on the stage. Sit in a half lotus position in front of the mic stand, which is festooned with flowers in my honor.

“In honor of our American guest, we will perform the great American movie music.... Lara’s Theme from Dr. Zhivago.”

And before I can do anything, they go into it.

Boom, chick, chick, Boom chick chick. “Somewhere, my love....”

It’s a nightmare. I can’t blow any of my McLaughlin licks over this stupid waltz.... And, dig this, I figure out they’re in the key of F Sharp Major. I didn’t even know there was a key of F Sharp Major.

I dribbled a couple of licks into the microphone, wait the thing out. Polite applause. So much for knockin’ ‘em dead in India. Sheesh.

When it’s time to go home, Gary decides to stay. He never leaves. He’s there now with a beautiful wife and baby girl.

I’m almost broke. Can’t afford the paper taxi, so I wait at the stop for No. 18, the Maharastra State Bus, the special that goes to Poona, then Bombay. Costs 75 rupees, about \$14.00. Takes about 15 hours.

Onboard, I’m seated next to an Australian photographer. Been kickin’ around the Far East and the Pacific Rim for years. Great stories.

Asleep at midnight as No. 18 lumbers over the Deccan Plateau. Blast of airbrakes. Look outside. Middle of nowhere. No stop is scheduled until Bombay. What gives?

Driver announces a rest stop. Everyone piles out. There’s a small boy with a big, flaming torch. He walks off down a dark path into the woods. I shrug to the Aussie. Everybody follows the kid.

We come around a turn in the thick brush and see a huge clearing containing rows and rows of wooden tables lit from above by strands of Christmas tree lights strung in the overhanging trees and vegetation. There's a sign tacked to the apex of a huge wooden arch. It's a picture of a horse's head surrounded by a downward pointing horseshoe: "Stud Beer."

In the middle of the Deccan, we had arrived at the Stud Beer Brewery, which was apparently owned by the driver's cousin, so the 18 stopped there every night without fail. Screw the State schedule.

There are dozens of pitchers of Stud on the tables with bowls of salty snacks called Papadam.

Me and the Aussie are drinking it and tossing back shots of terrible Imperial scotch. Trading stories. The one with the best story drinks for free. Loser pays. I lose by a mile. Here's the story that cost me a 45 rupee bar tab:

He was on assignment in some distant part of the Micronesian Archipelago.

Walks into a Curry house. Waiter comes over. Orders curried rice. Says he wants it hot.

Guy asks how hot. Guy points to a chart on the wall. Seven gradations of increasing spiciness. Waiter, seeing the guy is not a local, recommends number one or, at the most, number two.

Aussie takes offense. He's a seasoned traveler. Been in the bush for years. He's ain't no tourist. Asks the waiter what number he usually orders. Waiter looks uncomfortable, hems and haws.

Aussie presses him. Waiter says he orders number seven, but strongly, strongly advises the Aussie not to go past two, three at the absolute utmost.

Aussie orders seven, dammit, and opens his Times of India.

Fifteen minutes pass by. Place begins to fill up. People start drifting in by twos and threes. Lounging at the bar, hanging out in the corners.

Food comes out. Waiter puts it down and stands back. The room goes quiet.

"Rob, I remember putting the fork into the curry. I remember putting the fork into my mouth. I remember thinking that I had just swallowed, like, flaming razor blades. My eyes roll up to the ceiling. I notice the ceiling fan has dirty blades. Someone should clean it."

He woke up in the hospital. Took him two days to get on his feet. Never mess with the locals, O Great White Hunter.

Back on the 18. We pull into Bombay as the sun's coming up, burning the mist off the millet fields in the countryside.

The Pterodactyl Egg

Fall of 1969. In my first semester at Northwestern, Nixon bombed Cambodia illegally, which provoked a student strike. Kids started shutting down campuses, everywhere. Welcome to college! Boola. Boola!

One minute I was studying Shakespeare and the next thing I knew, I was standing on a barricade across Sheridan Road and yelling at businessmen in their Mercedes' as they tried to wend their way up to Winnetka. I went from King Lear to Les Miz.

Long hair, beard, red bandana. The whole shot.
No one shall pass, honkies!!

We took over (liberated was the term du jour) a space in the student union and declared it the Amazing Grace Coffeehouse. Free coffee and donuts. Free brown rice and apple juice. Twelve of us formed a collective and moved into a house in Evanston.

When the strike ended, the administration let us keep the place going. We painted the walls in a riot of psychedelia and put folk acts on stage. My rock group was the house band. "The Beans From Planet X." Yeah, I know, but it

was the 60's.

We started attracting name acts. It became the coolest place to play on the North Shore. A few years later, the place moved to Main Street and became a first rate club. Steve Martin worked the room in 1976. He was wearing the white suit and playing the banjo, back then. Charles Bukowski read there. Pat Metheny, Gary Burton, Oregon. We got 'em all.

By this time, I fancied myself a jazz guitarist and I had a trio. We were asked to be the opening act for Stephane Grapelli.

He was the violinist in Django Reinhardt's Hot Club of France Quintet in the 1940's. Django was an astounding Belgian Gypsy guitarist. Someone played me a recording of his a few years earlier and I gave up Rock and Roll and decided to play like him or die tryin'.

Before I heard Django, I didn't know it was possible to produce the kind of lyrical, soulful sound he coaxed out of that guitar. He was talking to you with that thing.

And now, I was gonna open up for Stephane Grapelli.

I made sure I was there when he arrived. I was about 25 at the time. It was February.

He swept into the club in a floor length greatcoat with an ermine collar and matching hat. He was in his seventies. A young boy walked two paces behind him holding his violin case. He looked like royalty. His cheeks were pink from the cold and he smiled broadly as I approached.

Summoning what I hoped was a kind of understated dignity, I extended my hand:

"Good afternoon, Mr. Grapelli, my name is...."

He leaned down and tweaked my cheek, hard. He laughed. He made burbling noises like he was amusing a baby. He spoke to the boy in French. I am sure he was saying something like:

'Isn't this cute? This little fellow is so serious...."

Then he walked passed me to the dressing room.

So much for my dignified welcome.

We opened for Bill Evans. Six shows. He had Eddie Gomez on bass and Elliot Zigmund on drums, two killer players off the NY scene.

He was such a sad cat. The whole weekend, he would go onstage and play hunched over the keys. Beautiful stuff, but so sad, somehow. Never said a word to the audience. He seemed lost.

One night, he noticed my Meher Baba button on my shirt. I had just come back from visiting the tomb of that spiritual master in India.

Bill's eyes lit up and he wanted to know all about Meher Baba and my trip. It was the most interested I had seen him in anything outside of whatever was going on inside him.

The last show was the 11:00PM hit on Sunday night. There were five people in the audience. For some reason, the fog blew away and he played with tremendous warmth. He was glowing. I wish he could have turned that on when the place was packed. You never know when the muse is going to visit. You just got to keep a light on in the window, just in case. He died the the year after this gig.

Here's how I got to be the house opening act to begin with. Like so many stories in showbiz, I got my big break by accident.

I was sitting in the crib at 6:30, on a Friday night. Just about to make myself a burger. Phone rings. It was Lenny, the house manager at the club and he was in a panic:

"Rob, you got a jazz trio, right? Can you have them onstage in an hour? My opening act for this weekend just bagged on me."

"My guys aren't around, man. We didn't have a gig, this weekend."

"Rob, I'm hung up. Can you do it as a solo? We're sold out the whole weekend for Charlie Mingus and his contract says we got to put on an opening act. Please, man, please!"

I was nowhere near ready to perform a solo set but how could I turn this down.?

An hour later, I was propped up in front of the stage lights. Thank God. At least I couldn't see the audience.

I ran through everything I knew. Then, I said thanks to the audience and

got up. Lenny was offstage left, waving frantically, flapping actually, flapping his arms and mouthing: "He's still in the air!! He's not here, yet."

So, I sat down and fumbled my way through some half baked versions of bossa novas. I looked over at Lenny. Flap. Flap. Flap.

I told the audience they were gonna hear the premiere of a new tune, "The Amazing Grace Blues". Great. I was making stuff up, now. In five more minutes, I would be doing card tricks and making doves fly out of my coat. This was getting desperate. The audience was, at first, politely bewildered by this cheap display. Now, they were just annoyed. It was come to Jesus time.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, as you might have guessed, Mr. Mingus has been delayed and frankly, I only know one more song but I really can't play it. It's by Mr. Mingus. "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat."

From the back of the house, a huge raspy voice says: "Play it."

It was Charlie Mingus.

And I thought I was in trouble before.

Charlie Mingus was a close friend of Lester Young, the genius tenor sax player from the 1940's. Everyone called Lester "Prez" 'cause he had a kind of regal authority. Always wore a pork pie hat. When he died, Charlie wrote a beautiful elegiac hymn to his memory. I had always loved it.

I hunkered down and played it with all my heart, the absolute best I could do. Screw it, if I was gonna lay an egg in front of one of the world's great jazz composers, I might as well make it a big one, a real Pterodactyl egg.

But the crowd loved it. It was the best thing I had done.

Later, Mr. Mingus told me he liked the way I played it. Maybe sometimes, if you just show up and take your swipes, good things happen.

Beats sitting in the crib with a hamburger, anyway.

Foot Humor

Moved back to New York from Chicago in 1979. Kicked around for a while, then I stepped in shit (in jazz parlance: got lucky). Cy Coleman cast me in the national touring company of his hit Broadway show "I Love My Wife" starring the Smothers Brothers. Same show I just did back in Chi.

I recommend a year on the road with the Smo Bro for anyway who's ever wondered if they have the guts to live or to commit suicide by jumping out of the top floor of a Ramada Inn.

Hit the road: Baltimore, Toronto, Denver, San Francisco, then a seven week bit at the Pantages in LA, where I had a girlfriend. I had met her on a touring company of Godspell. What a doll. She was in the movie. The strawberry blonde on the roller skates who sang "Day by Day", Katy Hanley. God, was I nuts about her. So I got this tour to hook up with her in LA at the end of it.

But there's many a slip betwixt the cup and the lip, my friend. Ho, Ho, bloody ho.

Baltimore. Morris Mechanic theater. The musicians and the chicks in the cast are jockeying for position. Guys pissing in a circle around them to see who gets the ingénue, and who gets stuck with the older character chick. Like that.

We make it to Toronto. We're at the Royal Alexandra Theater. Freakin' thing is so old, it's not the old school. They had to tear down the old school and wait a couple of hundred years and then they built this thing on the spot. Jeez.

So old there was no intercom system in the dressing rooms to let actors who were offstage know when to get ready to make their next entrance.

So there were five tiers of dressing rooms ten feet behind a huge scrim upstage center. If you wanted to hear your cue, you stuck your head out of your dressing room, cupped a hand around your ear hole and listened for the freakin' cue.

Kean played there. Garrick. Sandra Bernhardt, Druze, all of 'em. The Del Sartian school of Elocution. . An upturned palm at the forehead projects anguish. That shit.

Anyway, the drummer is a killer black cat off the NY studio scene, Denzel.

Real name was Warren Benbow, but nobody called him that. He left town leaving behind his divorced old lady and a three year old kid and an insanely complicated custody battle and settlement. He was offstage for a half hour in act two, and on the pay phone down the hall every night, getting into it with his ex.

Apparently, the conversation hadn't gone well on this particular night. He walked back to his dressing room, which was directly upstage center on the fourth tier and closed the door.

Now, you can hear a pin drop onstage and it rings in those dressing rooms. Tommy Smothers is mincing around and chortling through his Act II, scene II speech, when suddenly it sounds like a bomb is going off backstage. Denzel was undergoing a kind of breakdown. He was turning all the period furniture in his dressing room into kindling by hurling it willy nilly against the nearest wall.

By the time Maureen Flanagan (the character chick, not the ingénue) broke through the door, all she could do was hold him as he wept disconsolately on the floor.

Tommy managed to make it through the scene.

I was waiting in the offstage right wing for my entrance. The stage hand on the stage right rail just pulled on his work gloves, spat into a bucket, looked at me and said: "It's a little early in the day to grow weary" Never forgot that. It was true. We'd only been out of the city for six weeks. We wouldn't be throwing TVs out of windows for two months, yet.

So, we make it to SF. Curran theatre on Geary street. There I am in SF in 1980 with a ton of cash and a ninth floor crib with a terrace overlooking Taylor Street, fisherman's wharf and Alcatraz. Oh, mama.

Top of Act II, I'm offstage left. I'm not in the next three scenes, so Uncle Cy has me on bass guitar under headphones, playing a sweetening part for a really bizarre marching band number called "Scream". A marching band literally walks through the scene, in which the actors freeze in the midst of a difficult emotional moment. cute. Very 1979 cute.

So, there I am under the headset, guitar around my neck, just trying to do my job. But, now I have to run the gauntlet, the Tommy Smothers gauntlet. He would always drink at intermission and then the same crazy shit would happen, like, five minutes before my next cue. Sheesh.

"Psst. psst. Rob, rob c'mere...."

Tommy is in his offstage left star dressing room and is beckoning me.

Protocol is: Never miss a cue, never miss a downbeat. Never miss an entrance. But, all this is superceded if the star wants a sidebar with you five minutes before you have to hit. That's the protocol. He's the star. I'm Gunga Din. What can I do?

Take off the shit. Follow him into his dressing room.

"Rob. Check this out. Some fan from, like, Warsaw gave it to me at the Mayor's party last night. "

He produces a long bottle containing a clear viscous liquid. No label. Big green stalk of grass in the bottle. He takes a hit, passes the shit to me. Can't say no to the star.

We're passing this back and forth for a while. My ears are pricked up like Alvin the Chipmunk, 'cause I can hear that I'm, like, two minutes away from my downbeat.. But, what can I do?

Now, I'm getting so banged up behind this shit, my eyes are rolling around in their sockets like Wiley Coyote after he hits the bottom of canyon and the birdies are twittering in a circle around his head.

"So, Rob... you know what? You know what, man? "

"No, Tommy, What?

"You know, some acting teacher came up from LA and we went to dinner, whole bunch of us last night, and you know what he told me?"

"What, man?"

"He said: Tommy, you've got foot humor. Foot humor. You're so funny, you can make people laugh with your feet."

"Tommy, man, what are you talking about? I got a cue in like, two minutes."

"Foot humor. And I realized, Rob, I got it. He's right. That's my thing."

'Oh, man. Please. Look. Some other time, please man."

Now, at this point I'm really beginning to sweat. If I miss my downbeat, I'm the one who gets fired. The PSM (Production Stage Manager) is a very angry queen who does not suffer fools lightly.

So, I'm the one sucking wind. I'm the Gunga Ginny Din who doesn't get to see his movie star strawberry blonde roller skate Godspell chick in LA. I'm the one crawling back to town with my tail between my legs. Screw that.

"No, Rob really. I'll prove it to you. I bet you I can walk out there and just make the people laugh by moving my feet around. For as long as I want."

"Fine. That's great. Can't wait. Please, man. I got to go."

So, I leapt out of the star dressing room. And I put my shit back on and I'm so wasted I literally can't see the dot markers on the neck of the guitar.

I might as well be trying to play a French horn for the first time. I might as well try to play the horn solo from Til Eulenspiegel's Merry Freaking Pranks for the first time. Damn.

Tommy comes reeling out of the dressing room. He's actually managed to climb into most of his Act II costume. He's supposed to come on and turn to Dick and start off the second act of this smarmy wife swapping opus with a chirpy speech about free love, liberated morality and all that. It's all about him upstage center, Dicky down right, Tommy's wife down left, all with a quizzical expression of bemused mirth.

He enters in 8 (upstage, far upstage left), strides upstage center. The music comes up. The lighting guy at the far end of the house hits him with his special.

He opens his mouth. He's about to deliver his first line. But wait! What's he doing?

Crazy. He shifts his feet from left to right. Then he stares off to the heavens like he's just painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and he's wondering if it needs a second coat. A bemused smile plays in the right corner of his mouth.

A few snickers burble out of the audience.

He shifts his feet from right to left. More snickers.

Faster and faster. Feet moving. Consternation fleeting across his face, like his feet "have a mind of their own". Shit. What's his name did that five years ago, Steve Martin.

After about two minutes, the audience is howling. Beside themselves. Funniest damn thing they've ever seen. Charlie Chaplin who? Buster freaking Keaton who? Who needs those guys? We got foot humor boy, and he's a

stitch.

Dicky and the girls are paralyzed. Paralyzed. Staring straight upstage at him, like he's a statue come to life. They are horrified. And they have no recourse but to let this thing just play itself out.

Then, at the perfect moment, he pauses his foot shit, and leans way over to the left, looks straight at me. I catch the vibe: "See, Rob, foot humor?"

Crunchy Granola

So, it's 1980. I'm back in NY and I'm trying to break into the Broadway pit scene and I don't have a chair (in jazz parlance: a steady position, in this instance, a steady job in an ongoing show). So, I'm subbing for three different guys in three different shows.

It would not be unusual for me to be playing Evita at the Winterland on Wednesday afternoon, Dancin' at the Ambassdor on Wednesday night, and Barnum at the St. James on 45th St. on Thursday night. Just a day at the office, but with three different offices.

Now, this gets to be crazy making after a while. It became very confusing to try to figure out what show I am playing on any given night.

I would have dreams where I'm running up Broadway at 7:45 PM trying to make my downbeat at whatever show I'm supposed to be playing. Only, I can't remember where I'm supposed to be, so I'm running to the first theatre I can find.

I get to the Ambassador, at Broadway and 47th." Dancin'"

The show is a Bob Fosse dance musical. Features, like, twelve show stopping killer dance routines from a bunch of his musicals. But, the thing they forgot to tell the dancers is that they were going to have to work twelve times harder than in any show they'd ever done.

There were oxygen bottles and paramedics in both the offstage left and offstage right wings. Ambulances arrived at the stage door with the regularity of Pizza Hut delivery vans. You gotta love those dance kids. They got moxie.

So, in this dream, it's ten minutes to show time. I blast through the door, bolt downstairs to the bowels of the earth, also known as the musicians' locker room. I somehow remember the combination lock of the guy I'm subbing for. I open the locker and the whole book of music comes flying out like an accordion, pages flapping everywhere. I'm scooping them up, collating them like nuts.

I give up on that. Got to tune the guitars. I open the guitar case, take out the electric first. The other guitar I use in the show, the twelve string acoustic, is a nightmare to tune in real life, but in a dream, a dream that's rapidly going south into a creepy nightmare? Forget it.

So, I'm tuning the Fender but the strings are like strands of overcooked pasta. They stretch, they sag, there's no way to tune them up. So, I just grab the damn thing and hit the pit. Remember rule number one from the Smothers Brothers story? Never miss your downbeat. Never miss your cue.

I get to the pit, get ready to play and, in the way these things happen in dreams, I'm not holding a guitar anymore. I'm holding a French Horn.

But, in dream logic, I assume that I'm supposed to know how to play it, 'cause everybody in the pit is looking at me like I'm the Hornist (yes, that's word) and waiting for my horn solo. So twisted. So now,

I'm trying to calm down and I'm talking to myself.

"Now Rob, you used to play trumpet in High School. So, the French Horn is sort of like the trumpet but has to be transposed (altered in pitch and fingering) up a fifth."

So, in this dream (let's face it. It's no longer a dream. It's freakin' nightmare) I'm looking at the French horn music and trying to mentally transpose my trumpet fingerings up a fifth to what may or may not be the correct notes in French Hornese.

You get the idea. I wake up screaming.

Actually, the opening night when I really did play the show (on guitar, thank you Jesus) was also a living, waking nightmare.

I had just come to town from Chicago. I wheedled my way onto the Broadway sub list with some help from (God Bless him) Uncle Cy Coleman, the famous Broadway composer.

I go into the pit at Dancin' to look at the guitar book over the shoulder of the regular cat at a Saturday afternoon performance and I realize right away why I, a nubie from the cornfields of the Midwest, got the call to jump in instead of the dozens of other guys much more connected on the scene.

Here was the reason. The book was so freakin' hard that three other guys had just walked away from it. I was the only guy so broke and so new that I was willing to learn it and throw myself, literally, into the pit on a Saturday night, no rehearsal, no nothing, play it or screw it up in front of twenty five hundred Broadway patrons, which means laying my life, my professional life, on the line.

It's like cashing in the mortgage on your house at the roulette wheel in Vegas: "Come on, seven!! Let's go, seven" Ridiculous. But that was the gig. That was the only way to break into the scene.

I go home with a copy of the guitar book and my little walkman tape of the show, which I taped that night from the pit. I worked on it for three months. Every day. For eight hours a day.

I was finally ready. I called the regular guy and he "put me in" on the next Saturday night.

Now, the first minefield to be negotiated by the guitarist on this show is the opening number: "Crunchy Granola". Thirty five musicians in

the pit (this was back when orchestras still had orchestras in them) and the whole show starts with a lonely, solo acoustic twelve string guitar going : whang a whang a whanga bang bang bang! Totally out in front of everything else.

Now, here's where the fun comes in. After about thirty two bars, the guitar book has a four bar rest (at a very fast tempo. That means about five seconds) then you come in with a screaming electric guitar solo. What genius did this arrangement? (Ralph Burns, actually. If I ever meet him, I will mess him up)

Then, you change back to the twelve string, then back to the electric, off and on for the whole piece.

It was explained to me, very clearly by the regular guy, that the only way to do this was to have the twelve string on my lap, with the electric guitar over my shoulder, resting on my side, hanging by a strap.

I was supposed to play the first twelve string part, then put the thing down, resting it on the side of the Plexiglas drum booth to my right, swing the electric around my right side, play the screaming solo, swing the electric back around my back, stomp on the foot pedals to turn it off, grab the twelve, do the next bit on the twelve, and continue to alternate guitars in this sick vaudeville routine for about eight minutes. And this was only the first eight minutes of a three hour show.

Now do you see why the nubie was thrown to the lions?

So, there I am on opening night. Heart's pounding like the jack hammer the Con Ed guys are drilling onto the sewer grate down the block.

I make the opening bit on the twelve. Put it down, resting on the Plexiglas wall of the drum booth, swing the electric down, and begin the solo. However, and this is a big, fat however, my faithful readers, the drummer, Barry Herman, is so bored with playing this show for three years that he is amusing himself by playing so hard and loud that he is shaking the walls of the Plexiglas drum booth like they're made of Jell-O.

Let's not be gentile here, ok? He's pounding the hell out of the drums. But my twelve string guitar is leaning up against the left hand wall. And I notice, in the middle of my electric guitar solo, that's the guitar is beginning to slip to the right. There's nothing I can do about it. My hands are full of Fender. If that shit hits the ground, it will sprong so hard out of tune that there would be no point in picking it up again. It would be unplayable.

If it hits the ground, I should most probably just turn off my amp, doff my hat, and go home, taking my burgeoning Broadway pit career with me.

I'm sweating through the electric guitar solo One eye on the conductor, one eye on the music, and the third eye (didn't know I had one 'till then. Maybe I was the Dalai Lama in a previous life) glancing furtively at the 12 as it goes south.

I finished the solo and grabbed the 12 about two inches before it hit the ground.

I made it through the show and was asked back .
And I made it into the rotation of subs on Broadway.

Ah show business! Who can resist the charm, the magic of the footlights? I must have greasepaint in my blood!

Don't You Cry, Bo Peep. We Will Find Your Sheep.

Couple of weeks after I got back to NYC, someone told me about The Actor's Institute on 18th St., run by Dan Fauci. Great acting workshops, good teachers. Might as well keep my chops up.

I walk up this long flight of stairs and open the door. And seated on a little bench directly in front of me is this gorgeous girl with Kupie doll lips and the biggest blue eyes I'd ever seen. After a respectable pre-amble, I asked her out.

Turns out, her 25th birthday is next week. I ask some friends who know the ropes about a classy place to take her and somebody recommends Orsini's on 56th.

Dinner's going good. But, the weirdest thing. There is this lady, had to be in her fifties, at a nearby table getting pretty toasted with a young man that, I glean, is her son. She is staring at my date like she's seen a ghost, one that isn't going away, either.

Finally, she weaves over, plops both hands on the table between me and my date, puts her face to within six inches of Wendy's and slurs: "My God, dear, you look so much like Loretta."

Whoa. It's true. I suddenly realize that my date, Wendy, is the spitting image of Loretta Young as she appeared in "The Bishop's Wife" with David Niven and Cary Grant. And I mean, like, freaky spot on, man.

Wendy looks a bit sheepishly at her plate and murmurs: "She's my cousin."

Wendy Hammond grew up in Salt Lake City. She was raised knowing it was her destiny to someday take her place in the pantheon of the three Mormon families who were central to the founding of the Church; the Simmons', the Hammonds', and the Youngs, as in Brigham Young, her great great Uncle and, yeah, Loretta Young, her third cousin.

But Wendy chucked it in when she was about twenty, hopped a bus for NYC, and landed at Port Authority with fifty bucks in her pocket, determined to make it on Broadway.

The woman at our table was Cloris Leachman, the actress, who advised us to get out of theater before it ruined both our lives.

Charming.

(Waiter! Please bring the dessert cart and have the inebriated movie star removed before she completely torpedoes my evening. Thank you.)

Wendy and I stroll along the street. Everything's cool. Then, she suddenly bursts into uncontrollable tears. I hustle her into a horribly over lit donut shop and buy her coffee and talk her down. Didn't faze me. I was used to outbursts such as these from being with my last girlfriend. You had to make allowances for these artsy types. It comes with the territory.

Five minutes later, the clouds have parted. Everything's cool.

We go out together for two weeks. She tells me she wants to get more serious and I demur.

I told her I had just come off a year on the road and I wanted to hang loose for a while. Get my bearings back in the city. That sort of thing.

Or maybe I was a co-dendent mess inside and petrified of commitment due to deep seated, unresolved early childhood issues. (Whoa. What happened to light and funny?)

Anyway, we parted company..

Two weeks later, I make an appointment to visit the apartment of an agent who says he can hook me up with movie scoring contacts. At this point, I want to be a movie music composer.

I'm in his Chelsea apartment playing him a dozen different clips of music I'd written for little films and TV. Got cassettes out all over his Goodwill coffee table.

He leans over and tells me to turn it down a little, 'cause his brand new girlfriend is asleep in the next room. Hot actress chick he met at the Actor's Institute, maybe I knew her.....Wendy Hammond.... Hey, Rob, what's wrong....are you ill?:

I extend my right forearm and swept all my tapes off his table into my cheesy Banana Republic bag. I walked out. I could just make out the sound of his voice fading away as I bolted down the stairs:" Hey. Hey. What the hell? Hey."

Made it back to my loft at the corner of Greenwich and Canal. Was able to stave off a complete mental breakdown until then. You see, I guess it took that crazy, cosmic slap in the face to hip me to the fact that I was in love with Wendy and I had blown it. Big time.

I started obsessing about her. Couldn't stop thinking about her. My God, I was crazy. I should have never let her go. Turns out, she was the love of my life and now she was with some agent.

After not sleeping or eating for a week, I got up the nerve to call her. No, she was not interested in coffee or anything else with me. She had moved on. I love that phrase. Moved on. What was she, a pioneer? Had she rounded the bend in the Missouri Breaks and was mapping out the unexplored territory for the Millard T. Fillmore administration? What do you mean, moving on?

Every couple of weeks, I would summon up the courage to call her. I would either get the machine, or she would be very curt and hang up. They hadn't coined the term stalker yet, but that was my job description.. Couldn't live without her.

Finally, after two months of this noise, I actually pulled my act together.

Made a deal with myself. It was a Thursday in September. I resolved to call her one more time. If she blew me off again, I decided

that would be a sign from God or whoever that it was time for me to find out the meaning of the phrase “to move on”. That would be the deciding omen from the Oracle of “Whoever Was Calling the Shots Out There”, a religion I just made up, but I liked it. It suited me.

7:00 PM. Time for the deciding phone call. I just came out of a singing lesson. I was studying classical vocal technique with this great guy Felix Knight (got to be a stage name from the 20’s). Had to be, like in his late 70’s.

Claim to fame: He played Tom Tom, Little Bo Peep’s ‘ Boyfriend, in the 1932 classic movie musical: “Babes in Toyland,” starring Laurel and Hardy. Had a song, too. He sat on a big painted toad stool in fairytale village and consoled her:

“Don’t you cry, Bo Peep.
We will find your sheep,
Wherever they have strayed.”

Signed picture of Laurel and Hardy in his foyer. Had to pass it at every lesson on the way to the music room.”

“Rob, Mr. Laurel was an elegant gentleman and a pro. Didn’t like the fat man, though Real jerk. Every day at 4:30 in the afternoon he would throw a fit on the set if we hadn’t wrapped, yet. Refused to miss his 5:00 tee time at the Wilshire Golf Course. Had to get his nine holes in. What a prick. What are you gonna sing for me today, “Fanny”?”

So, I get to a pay phone in the rain somewhere on the upper West Side. Take a deep breath and make my last phone call to Wendy Hammond. Jeez. That sweet birthday dinner at Orsini’s felt like it had taken place years ago.

“Hi. Wendy, it’s Rob. Listen, would it be possible to just get together and talk about.....”

Big explosion of crying and yelling. “Why don’t you leave me alone? I don’t like you. I don’t trust you. You blew me off, so don’t ever call me again....(bang)”

Alright then. The Oracle of Whoever is Out There has spoken. Om Mani Padme screw me. Thank you. Thank you for the clear message. I closed the door to the pay phone booth a new man. Whatever “moving on” was, I was gonna do it.

Take the Broadway Local (7 train) downtown to my loft at

Greenwich and Canal, virtually in the mouth of the Holland Tunnel entrance to New Jersey, which would haunt my dreams for years, but that's another image from another story, dear patient reader.

Throw my ax on the couch, flop down, call my answering service. That was the cool thing then in NYC. You didn't have a machine. You had an answering service.

"Hi, dear. Any messages?"

"Yeah. Call Wendy."

I sit up in the couch.

"Uh, this must be, like, a really old message, right?"

"No, Rob. Came in twenty minutes ago. You want the number?"

Poured a scotch. It wasn't good scotch but it was the right color and did the thing.

Dialed the number and held the phone a foot away from my head as it rang. Don't need to hear the same screaming twice in one day.

"Yeah, hi Rob. Look, something really strange just happened. I think we need to talk."

And this is what she told me. No elaboration. No embellishment. So, sit down, dear reader:

After she hung up on me, she walked out of her little apartment on 48th and 8th Avenue and started walking south on 8th, trying to clear her head. She's crying.

When she got to the corner of 8th Avenue and 45th, a young woman walks out of the crowd and approaches her.

"Excuse me, but I can see you're upset. Is there anything I can do? Perhaps we could have coffee and you could talk about whatever is wrong?"

Wendy, being Wendy, thought this was a great idea.

They go out to coffee, spend the afternoon together, become friends. At the end of the day, they're getting on the subway together. The young woman turns to Wendy and says:

“So, who is this guitar player guy who you’re so upset about?”

“Oh. He just moved here from Chicago. His name is Rob Tomaro.”

Without missing a beat, the chick pipes up with:

“Oh, well, my name is Gail Adrian and I was Rob’s girlfriend in Chicago for three years, like, seven years ago. I haven’t spoken to him since and he doesn’t know I’m on the East Coast, but listen: Rob’s a great guy. Maybe you should give him another chance.”

Gail was, indeed, my last girlfriend, a jazz singer with a penchant for bursting spontaneously into uncontrollable tears. That’s why it didn’t faze me when Wendy did that on our first date.

Now, understand. Wendy is an actress and a burgeoning playwright. She believes in: miracles, Angels, pixies, crystals, Unicorns, benevolent Astral Beings, everything that ‘s floating around out there. This was a serious SIGN for her. So, she called me.

We moved in together two weeks later. We married two years after that. I wish I could end this by saying we’re still together, but that was not to be.

But yeah, she was the big enchilada. She was the one. And look what it took for me to see it?

Thank you, oh, non Denominational sort of God or Benevolent Energy Thing that helped me out. I love you.

Pops meets the Prezz

You might hear this one on a break between sets on a Bandstand anywhere between Paris and LA.

1968. Louis Armstrong is flying home after a European tour. His trumpet case rests on the seat beside him. He pats it, occasionally.

His bass player comes up from the back of the plane. His face glistens with sweat. He is clearly agitated.

“Pops. Please, man, please let me flush that shit. You’ll never make it through customs. You’re gonna get us all busted, man. All the cats are flippin’ out back there.”

“Aw, you guys worry too much. Take it easy, baby. Ain’t nothin’ gonna happen. Relax, man.”

Louis never worried about anything. He also never had a bad word to say about anyone, always tried to offer something positive, to whoever it might be.

After the war, he was playing in Milan. He was approached by some cats who played in a band with Roberto Mussolini, the son of the dictator. Fancied himself a jazz piano player. They convinced Louis to make it across town after his show to catch their late set and offer some critique.

Louis and his band showed. Roberto was on the stand. And he was stinkin’ up the joint. Sounded like he was playin’ with his elbows.

Mussolini and his cats clamor over after the set and eagerly approach

Louis.

“Well, Mr. Armstrong what did you think of our band?”

“Um.....um....uh....Gee, it was a shame what they did to your old man!”

That was Pops.

Back to the scene on the plane.

The trumpet case was stuffed with Marijuana. Louis smoked it everyday of his life from the time he was 17. His trumpet was wrapped up in some shirts in the baggage compartment.

His plane was about to touch down at Kennedy. There were some reporters and photographers assembled on the tarmac to greet him.

Air Force One had just touched down a few minutes earlier and was rolling to a stop about five hundred yards away. Onboard, President Nixon looked out the window and wondered what was going on.

When an aide informed him that Louis Armstrong was arriving, Nixon perked up: “That man is a great American and a credit, a real credit to the Negro People. Arrange for a greeting with him as soon as he lands.”

The cameras were rolling as the two walked toward each other. They greeted warmly. Pops put his trumpet case down to take the President’s hand in both of his. He gave the photogs that million dollar Satchmo smile.

By the way, nobody, but nobody called him Satchmo, which is short for Satchel Mouth. If you gained a few pounds, would you want your friends calling you Fat Ass? Everybody called him Pops. He was the father of modern jazz.

If you listen to those recordings with King Oliver from 1923, you hear the clarinet solo, the trombone solo, then Pops steps up and blows and it sounds like it could be recorded forty years later. His phrasing, his soul, his sound, his whole approach is unstuck in time. He was blowing jazz into the future.

“Mr. Armstrong, I’ve long been an admirer of yours. You know, I play the piano a bit, too. But I’m nowhere near your league. No, sir!. Listen, it’s great to meet you. Is there anything that I can do for you or your boys?”

“Well, now that you mention it, Mr. President, I’m afraid I sort of sprained my wrist back in Paree. Maybe you could help me out and carry my trumpet case through customs.”

“Why, it would be an honor, an honor to carry the instrument of an artist such as yourself who has given so much to the culture of our great nation. “

And he did. And that's what happened.

“

Lost in Translation

For some reason, a wedding is called a club date. In New York, that is. In Boston it's a G. B. date (for general business, aka, general bullshit) and in Chicago it's a jobbing date. It's all the same shit, with a couple of regional nuances thrown in which you need to find out about. Like this:

These bands never rehearse. Everyone is expected to know all the tunes and the protocol. When the leader calls a tune, he turns around with his back to the dance floor and says: "Night and Day". Then, he flips the band a quick hand sign which lets you know what key its gonna be in.

I started out in Chicago. First thing I learned was the signs. Flats are down. Sharps are up. If the leader calls "Night and Day" and extends three fingers down from inside his palm, you know we'll be in the key of Eb, which has three flats (Eb, Bb, and Ab). If he calls "Leaving on a Jet Plane" and flips two fingers up, we're

the key of D (two sharps: D sharp and F sharp). Simple but it works. Most of the time.

I moved to New York in 1979 and was booked on my first Club Date (never call it a jobbing date on Long Island unless you really wanted to be branded as a straw chewing Midwestern rube). Was there in plenty of time. Wanted to impress the leader of this big deal office which had a ton of work for guitar players.

Guy turns around and calls off the first tune. "Ipanema" he says, and flips one finger up. So, it's gonna be "The Girl From Ipanema" in the key of G (one sharp). Band starts to play and I realize about three bars in that I sound like I've gone insane. It's sounds like my guitar is crazily out of tune. I just stop playing. I stare at my guitar like its turned into a poisonous snake around my neck.

He gives me a look. Waves off the tune. The band grinds to a halt. The dancers stumble and stop. Stares right at me: "Come on, come on, damn it , they told me you know the tunes. I Get a Kick Out of You!"... and he flips three fingers up.

We start again and I sound like ass again. I'm beginning to sweat. I just stop. I sit down. They continue the tune as I watch my career seeping away like the sweat running down my neck into my ruffled shirt.

Nobody told me that, unlike the Midwest, on Long Island sharps are down and flats are up, exactly the opposite of what I had been taught. I had been playing in G while everyone else was in F. I had been playing in A while everyone else was in Eb. Heart attack shit but I finally figured it out.

The King of the Screamers

In the Wedding Band business, you always dread the call telling you you're gonna be the leader on a screamer that weekend. And I can think of no better way to describe what a screamer is than to tell you about Cy Cogan, The King of the Screamers.

Cy would sit in his office, organizing his bands that would be going out in the coming weekend. Phone rings. (The following dialogue must be heard through the whine of a severe Long Island accent 😊)

"Cy, it's Eleanor Finkelstein."

"Oh, how are you, Mrs. Finkelstein. So nice to hear from you. What can I do for you, darling?"

"Cy, my youngest daughter is getting married on June 15 at the Huntington Town house and I want to hire your band."

"Of course, dear. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to provide the entertainment for your wonderful event."

"But listen Cy, I want you and your first band. I'll pay extra. I don't care. I don't want any of your other band leaders."

"Absolutely, dear. Of course. I'm writing the date down now. It's in stone. I'll have the contracts mailed out today."

"Thank you Cy. This is going to make my little Cheyl so happy."

(click)

Phone rings again five minutes later.

"Hello Cy, this is Ethel Shapiro."

"Oh, hello Mrs. Shapiro. How nice to hear from you. What can I do for you, darling?"

You see where this is going. In the month of June, the busiest month in the wedding band business, Cy would book himself at five weddings on the same night. He would play the most plum gig and have four other leaders do the other parties.

The other leaders would all walk into the other parties and say:

"Mrs. Finkelstein, Cy is so sorry. He can't be here. His mother is dying in Florida and he's on his way down there."

And then the mother of the bride starts screaming. Et, Voila, ze screamer!

At that point, though, who is going to send the band packing and have no

entertainment at their daughter's wedding? It's the perfect scam.

Ah, but the wheel of Karma swings inexorably round and round. Cy was sitting at his desk one day in June of 1982 when the phone rang. Yep, his mother was dying in Florida.

"Nice corsage"

Wedding band musicians are so bored that they pretty much mime their way through songs while staring at drunken bridesmaids doing the limbo in their ugly, expensive dresses.

Dreaming of doing one of them in the cloakroom on a break. Rarely does this happen, except to Morey.

He is legendary in the club date business. The Lothario of Long Island. He was a sax player, dumpy, balding, but for some reason, catnip to chicks. He would set his sights on a bridesmaid, trundle over to her at the steam table, mumble a few words, and they would surreptitiously slip out the back for twenty minutes.

I asked him how he did it. Like an oracle in a dreamy fog, Morey didn't want to analyze his gift too closely. "I don't know, Rob, I just say the first thing that comes to mind and chicks seem to dig it."

"Well, what did you say to that blond you just picked up?"

"Nice corsage"

"That's all?"

"Yeah, nice corsage. I guess that was enough."

Everything's Coming up Marnie

The Bar Mitzvah is the perfect opportunity for you to stick it to your friends. Nothing says how well you're doing more effectively than an ostentatious display of wealth at your kid's coming of age bash.

Played a Bat Mitzvah in West Orange. At the cocktail party before the dinner, which is known as the pre-heat, the proceedings were revving up to a fever pitch in anticipation of the entrance of the Bat Mitzvah girl.

There were clowns. There was a guy making balloon animals. There was a magician pulling quarters out of kids' ears. There was a ring of dry ice emitting an eerie fog in the corner, as two mimes on ice skates swirled around and around on it.

Then, on cue, we launched into "Everything's Coming up Marnie" which was, of course, the song from Gypsy with specially crafted sycophantic lyrics extolling the attributes of the miraculous Bat Mitzvah girl.

A spotlight comes up on a curtain. The drummer hits a cymbal. And there emerges Marnie, led into the room atop an elephant, wearing her favorite pink bathrobe and fuzzy slippers, brandishing a Connair hair dryer aloft like a scepter.

Cat next to me says: "There's not enough therapy in the world to fix what this is going to do to this little girl. And can you imagine the poor little Princeling who thinks he's good enough to marry her some day? Good luck."

And through it all, the mimes, the clowns and the magician danced 'round

and 'round and bellowed out the special lyrics. Everything's coming up Marnie.

Announcing the Next Course

There is an art to the way a club date leader will slip in announcements while singing and playing any given tune. Some do it elegantly. Some don't. Here's my favorite announcement:

The leader was a jerk with a transparent orange plastic drum set and a cheap mic on a goose neck stand. We were playing "New York, New York" when the Maitre D gives him the nod. Means the next course is about to be served, so find a way to clear the dance floor. Here's how he does it:

We're revving up to the big chorus line kick ending. The bridesmaids were all lined in an inebriated kick line.

He's playing and singing and whipping himself into a froth as the tune steams into the climax:

"It's up to you (bang)....New....(crash).....York.....(slam) Noooooooooo!
(drum roll).... (shouted:) Your soup is being served!!!.....(sung) Yorrrrrrrrrk!
(crash).

You're the Guitar Player They Sent Me?

I was setting up my gear one Saturday night when a particularly inflamed wedding band leader who I had never seen before launched himself across the room and accosted me.

"You're the guitar player? You're the guitar player they sent me? (rolls his eyes up to an indifferent God). Listen, this is a very important client for this office so everything has to be sharp. When I want a song, I want it right away. So, we'll do all the new disco shit in front then I'm not sure whether to start with Bossas or Society shit during dinner. Do you know Summer Samba?"

I slowly strapped on my guitar and plucked my pick from between the strings. I wrapped my left hand around the neck in first position. I used my right hand to place my first two fingers of my left hand on the strings in the outline of a

chord. Then I looked up at him and said: "Well, let's see. I know G7 and D and Am, like this", and I showed him the chords on the guitar neck.

When I looked up from the guitar at him, his jaw was slack. He was sinking into a deep panic. His face had turned the color of cheese.

I let him stew for a second, then I leaned close and whispered "Listen, Skippy. Let's not kid ourselves. We're both standing here in these reeking tuxes 'cause it's the third gig this weekend. We both came in through the back, sliding along the same grease in the kitchen. So, I think the least we can do, since we have no dignity left, is to assume each of us can do his job. Now, what do you want to start with, bossas or society shit?"

Taking the Big Hop

We were at a resort in New Hampshire, hanging in the lounge on the afternoon of New Year's Eve, 1985.

We were booked as the opening act for Danny and the Juniors, who had a hit in the 50's with "At the hop". Thing is, these fifties acts morph and replicate like amoebas. There were at least three Danny and the Juniors, two Coasters,

and God knows how many Penguins floating around out there.

This phenomenon of fraudulent bands is particularly endemic among the English Invasion acts. At one point there were at least four Herman's Hermits flouncing around the casino stages of the southern resort circuit. One of them actually had the real Herman, whose name is Peter Noone.

But, as we were ruminating on how many, if any, original Juniors would be appearing that night, our leader walked in and told us to pack up. The gig was cancelled. The hotel owner just turned on the TV and found out that the real Danny just jumped out of a hotel window in Vegas.

Heidee, heidee, heidee, ho!

Tough year, 1985. Problems with my marriage and no dough around to soften the bumpy bits. Gigs were drying up all over. Pit orchestras on Broadway were shrinking overnight before my eyes, like little villages struck with plague. Never knew who was gonna be there the next day. Bring out your dead.

Played "Dancin'" in 1980, when I first got back to town. Thirty five guys in the pit. Five years later, you got three synthesizers, a kazoo, and a pre-recorded track. Broadway orchestras are being downsized out of existence. Bitch, bitch, bitch. So, quit, jerk. What? And give up show business!?

Anyway, I was thinking of chucking it. It didn't seem to be worth it. Why keep banging my head against the same wall. And my old lady wasn't making any dough, either, so what the hell?

Only steady gig I had was every Wednesday at the Red Parrot on 57th street. Huge, cavernous disco that did Big Band night every Wednesday. Sixteen piece 1940's big band in white blazers with and embroidered red parrots on the upper right pocket.

We accompanied stars from the past, who were still kickin' around; Margaret Whiting, who was a sweetheart and an elegant pro and still sang her ass off like she was twenty. Etta James, with a voice that banged off the back of that hanger like she was singing through a bull horn.

But there was one artist who really got to me. After working with him, I just shut my yap, took life as it came, and just kept playin'. Ain't looked back since.

When you showed up for work, you went down to the musicians' locker room and got out your ax and your blazer from your locker, then the leader told you who the featured artist would be that night.

One night I walked in and the leader said the artist de jour wanted to have a word with the rhythm section in his dressing room in about five minutes. So, me, the drummer, the bass player and the piano player suit up and knock on the star dressing room door, which is an elegant name for a little shit hole with a mirror and a sink, stuck in an even dingier part of the basement. Pipes leaking outside the door. Air convection unit emitting a constant drone five feet away so you had to yell to be heard in the room. Jesus. So embarrassing.

“Come on in, boys!”

We walk in and there, looking like a million bucks in a crème dressing gown over a scarlet cravat, was Cab Calloway. Cab freakin’ Heidi ho, Minnie the Moocher Calloway, big as life. Who knew he was still alive, let alone still workin’?

He was daubing some light makeup on his eyelids and cheeks at the makeup mirror, which was ringed with about thirty bulbs. Three of ‘em worked and one kept on trying to flicker on and off.

He glanced at us to his left as we crammed ourselves into the room and turned on that thousand kilowatt smile. Teeth like two rows of Broadway marquee lights, flashing, flashing on and off when he parted his lips.

“Now, boys, nothin’ to my act that’s too tricky, so don’t worry. Drummer, just catch me when I go downstage during “Minnie the Moocher”

Catch me: means to give accents on the drums and cymbals to enhance whatever exaggerated moves or motions he might go into. Years and years of drummers in strip clubs had evolved this into something of an art form.

“Guitar player, just give me two and four real hard on Heidi ho.

Means he wanted accents on those two beats of every measure, to reinforce the pulse, the driving beat.

“Mr. Piano, just play it pretty straight. No too many fills, if you please. That’s it boys. I’m sure we’ll be fine. Thanks for stoppin’ by. See you out there.”

Last thing I remember about that little session was when I turned around to leave and there, hanging in a huge clear plastic dry cleaner bag, was his classic white tie and tails tuxedo. Pristine, untouchable, immaculate. Hanging from that filthy door like the cherished robes of a departed saint on the altar of a religion that was over long ago.

Jesus. We were gonna work with Cab Calloway.

He was a huge star in the early forties. If you look at some of those films of him leading his own band, you see a tornado of energy barely contained in a human body. He shook. He shimmied. He moaned and wailed. Like he was being turned inside out by some primordial force over

which he had very little control.

Conked hair, way too long for the period, flopping up and down. Belting it out like an opera star and sweatin' like a Baptist preacher. Cab always brought down the house as he rang them changes, tellin' you every thing you needed to know about that "down hearted frail" Minnie the Moocher, who was, sadly, a "real hoochie koocher", laid low after a life of flapper excess. Don't let this happen to you, girls. Don't end up like Minnie.

Out front, the denizens of disco, fueled by whatever was around that night, couldn't possibly care less about Big Band night. They were just there to score, to gawk at whatever stars wandered in, to be seen on the scene, and to claim to have been there if something really untoward occurs in the wee hours, which it usually did.

On the stand, tuning up. Got a bird's eye view of the nightly Bacchanal. Tonight, Rick James, dreadlocks doused with enough glitter to choke Tinker Bell, was holding court on the floor to three or four girls who giggled and shrieked at every thing Superfreak had to say.

He was surrounded by a ring of bodyguards who cordoned off a magic circle around him to keep the creeps away. As he strolled through the joint, the circle moved with him, like a floating human halo around the head of a profligate saint.

Lights up. Drum roll. "Ladies and Gentlemen please welcome our featured artist this evening, Mr. Heidi Ho himself, the legendary, the one and only Cab Calloway!!"

And he explodes on the stage. Had to be in his eighties at this point, but the years just fell away like dust as he worked that crowd. Opened with Moocher. The disco kids just gravitated to the front of the stage like they were hypnotized, which they sort of were. Cab knew his shit. He had been honing this act since, like, 1939.

Ends with Heidi Ho. Now, these kids had never heard that tune before. Didn't know heidi from ho from a bag of walnuts, but Cab had them screaming, screaming back at him: "I can't hear you! Now, I know, I just know you can do better than that boys and girls. One mo', just one mo' time for Uncle Cab: Heidi, heidi, heidi ho!!"

And they roared it back at him. And the night was wonderful. And then the lights went down and he was gone and the disco murk closed in again like fog at La Guardia and covered up whatever thing we had all

just been in.

But it opened my eyes to somethin'. God bless him, f he could find a way to dig deep and do Minnie the Moocher like that every night for fifty something years, and I mean it came up from the soles of his feet and blasted out the top of his head; if this beautiful show biz pro could turn that on like it was happening for the first time every night (and wasn't it, at least for those kids?) then I figure I could find some kinda how to be inspired to strap on my ax and give it every thing I got, every night, everywhere they let me. Heidi freaking ho, boys and girls.

Works of Art

Tony Imperiale started buying up Hudson river front property on the Jersey side in the early 60's. By the time my band got a call to play on his yacht in 1985, he owned everything from the waterline to about 600 yards inland from the Verrezano narrows to the GW bridge.

He hired out his yacht for parties. It would sail from the quay in Weehawken, cruise around Manhattan, and be back by midnight. The boat was stunning and also gleaming. It just got five more coats of polyurethane in Capri. Quarter of a million dollar coat of plastic.

I set up my gear in the ballroom, which was decorated with good reproductions of impressionist art, Gauguin, Cezanne, even a small Van Gogh from the potato eater period.

I was in the john standing over the toilet. Having nothing better to focus

on, I gave some scrutiny to the reproduction of a Lautrec sketch. Very clever. It was even done on a bit of tablecloth to make it look like the original, which was drawn while the Can Can girls whirled at the Moulin Rouge. Then, I noticed something that so unnerved me that I stopped in mid stream. It wasn't a copy. It was real.

I returned to the party room and took a closer look at the rest. All real. What kind of balls do you have to have to expose millions of dollars of impressionist art to a constant parade of drunken revelers with beer bottles and plates of meat balls weaving around a moving boat? Beats me.

The next guy onboard was Russ Moy. Great guy. Fair drummer. Nervous as hell. Jumpy. Always on guard lest the tiniest thing might go wrong on a job with a high end client like Mr. Imperiale.

Russ loads his drums onboard and hauls them to the room, waving goodbye to his wife, who drove him over to Weehawken from their home in Elizabeth.

He had just landed an endorsement deal with Impact Drums. Some new concept. Gleaming candy apple red drums that flared out at the bottom like megaphones. Supposed to extend the sound or something. They sounded like shit.

Mr. Imperiale walks into the room to give the table setting the once over. He glances at Russ, who is grinning and practically bowing. Tony removes his Chesterfield from his lips long enough to say, softly but clearly: "Get those fuckin' Puerto Rican drums off my boat." And leaves the room.

I thought Moy was gonna vapor lock. He leaps onto the quay and heads for a pay phone at a dead run. He wife shows up with his B set about five minutes before we set sail. Sheesh.

Tony Walks the Wire

Drum roll. Jim Dale, the star of the show, walks upstage and stands in front of me. There is a spotlight on his back.

The orchestra is lined up behind a wooden fence. I'm holding a banjo. It's Saturday night at the St. James Theater. "Barnum" by Cy Coleman.

P. T. Barnum has hit rock bottom by the end of the play. Jim is brooding, his back to the audience. He is working himself into a dramatic state before turning around and singing the reprise to "There's a Sucker Born Every Minute". Barnum ain't down, yet! Ends the show. Brings down the house every night.

The musicians know enough not to look at him. He's in the middle of a very serious actory moment. Mustn't disturb an arteest at work.

Jim's going on vacation for two weeks. Tony Orlando will be filling in for him. Tony Orlando? The "Tie a Yellow Ribbon" guy is gonna be Barnum? It'll never fly.

I was wrong.

Tony gets a tour of the theater the day before his first rehearsal. Walks into the band room.

"Hi guys!" A few of us wave back.

Walks into the stagehands' room. They're banging on an ancient TV, tryin' to get the Yankee game. Thing has aluminum foil rabbit ears.

"Hi guys!" They don't even look up. Bang. Bang. Bang.

On Tony's opening night, each member of the cast finds a little jewelry box in front of their makeup mirror. They each get a gold key on a gold chain:

"This great cast is the key to a great show. Thanks for all your help. Love, Tony."

The stagehands walk into their room. The old TV is gone. There's a new Sony Trinitron with a thirty five inch screen.

"Gotta support the Yanks! Thanks for everything, guys!. Tony"

Was he nuts?

He was smart.

The scene changes over the next two weeks were forty per cent faster than before.

At the end of the first act, Barnum walks a tightrope strung fifteen feet above the stage. No net. Just the cast underneath him.

You tell me. Someone gives you a gold key, You gonna catch him or not? Not that you wouldn't try without the key. You're just gonna try harder, with it.

He fell off the wire every night. Never touched the ground.

Opening night, he stops the music during the bows. Turns to the audience:

“Where else but in America could a Puerto Rican kid from twenty blocks north of here grow up to be on Broadway. God Bless America and God Bless you all!!”

Drum roll. End of the show. Saturday night. Tony is right in front of me, getting ready to sing “Sucker”. We avert our eyes. This is where Jim scowls at the floor.

But Tony ain’t Jim. Puts on his hat. Big grin. Winks at us:

“Have a nice weekend, boys.”

Presto Chango

Morey Bergman had been playing weddings for the Duchin office since back in the days of the old man, Eddie, not Peter. Nothing fazed this guy. He'd seen it all and pissed on half of it.

We were finishing an afternoon date on Oyster Bay. Then he had an early start at Temple Beth Shalom in Great Neck. That meant packing up his drums and tearing up the L. I. E. at a blistering pace in his ancient Volvo. Me and the guys looked at our watches. The leader just booked us on a half hour overtime. We smirked. This was gonna be the day Morey missed his downbeat on his evening date. No way he'd make it.

We were playing the last two tunes when Morey went into his act. He was playing drums and cymbals with his right hand and the bass drum with his right foot and tearing down his kit methodically with his left hand. Never missed a beat. The left hand never stops moving. The right hand never stops playing. Off comes the wing nut from the ride cymbal, which is slipped into a case next to the set. Off comes the high tom tom, which goes into a box.

Drummers have amazing independence. Piano players have the ability to move both hands independently to produce separate rhythms. Drummers have complete independence of hands and feet. The jazz drummer Jack DeJohnette can play four different rhythms in four different time signatures at the same time, two with the hands and two with the feet. And Morey could deconstruct the kit and play at the same time. It was like a little ballet.

By the time we got to the last note of "New York, New York", Mory hit his cymbal, which was the only thing still visible. Before the crash faded away, he slipped it into the case and bolted out of the room. I hear he made his start at Beth Shalom.

Jack Gets a Piece of the Cake

When Arnold Schwarzenegger married Maria Schreiver, the security at the Kennedy compound was so serious that not even the craftiest paparazzo could find a way in. Dozens of them lined the entrances in all directions, slavering like ravening wolves.

My friend Jack Bashkow was on sax that night for the Lester Lanin Orchestra. Jack got off the band shuttle, walked through the metal detector, opened his sax case for inspection, and was ushered into the huge tent where the reception was to take place.

An hour later, with the party in full swing, Jack sat placidly on the bandstand, honking his way through Cole Porter numbers, when the maitre D called the happy couple out from behind the head table to cut the wedding cake.

Amid tumultuous applause, Arnold and Maria approach the massive cake. At the exact moment Arnold was poised to insert a piece of cake into his bride's expectant, upturned mouth, Jack whipped out a disposable camera and snapped one photo with no flash. The camera was gone in the next instant.

The next day, he sold the shot to the New York Post for \$10,000.

Rio Bravo!

In the summer of '89 I was out again with the NYU Contemporary Ensemble. The tour took us down the east coast of Italy to Pescara, then by boat to Split, Yugoslavia, by car to Zagreb in the north, and ending up by train to Budapest.

It was a crystalline day as the ship embarked from Pescara for the eight hour crossing to Yugoslavia. I was lying on deck catching some rays when a shadow falling across my face made me open my eyes. A guy was passing overhead wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the logo: "Doc's Funky Junky Music Shop.". Damn. This can't be right.

"Hey, man. I know that shop. I bought strings and picks there a few years ago when I was doing a show at the Parker Playhouse in Lauderdale. There can't be two places with that name."

"Absolutely right, man. That's the joint."

"Boy, that's crazy. I remember it was owned by a big transvestite, called herself Doc"

"Yeah, man. That's me."

"Get the hell out."

"Serious. Just picture me wearing a big Dolly Parton wig."

I squinted at him in the sun, which created a kind of halo around his head and that did the trick. "Small world, ain't it?"

We talked and drank bad yugo beer as the sun trailed behind us and the moon came out over Yugoslavia.

Eight o'clock on the knob, I look up and we're coming into the slip. The ancient Roman town of Split. And the harbor is completely covered in palm trees. I kid you not.

Doc says: "Crazy, ain't it? We're so far south that palm trees grow in this part of Yugoslavia."

Next night, we're playing for a huge crowd on the waterfront. A three night bid, with the same opening act. I get to know them. Great guys. A Yugoslavian punk band called, I swear, Chamomile Tea. Somebody must have come back from the US after the Summer of Love and slipped 'em that moniker.

Leather jackets, nose rings, purple hair. But they had a weird stage stance. They all sang tilting forward into the microphones at around ten degrees south of plum dead center. Looked like they were leaning into a stiff wind.

Yeah, they looked like the Pistols, but they all crooned in this eerie warble that made that made no sense at all. I found out why on the first night they kidnapped me and forced me to drink filthy Stock brandy till my head was splitting (no pun intended, I guess).

The following inebriated conversation is as verbatim as my muddled noggin can recall it:

Eric (the leader, speaking in a luxurious thick Croatian drawl): "Rob, Rob, you are so very fortunate to come from U.S. Surely, you must know everything by our favorite American singer."

I'm looking at the gear and the mohawk. "Uh, Joey Ramone?"

Quizzical look.

"Iggy Pop?"

Another jaundiced look. The drummer pipes up: "No Rob, no. Dean Martin!!! Wasn't he great in Rio Bravo?"

And then it made sense. They all sang like Dean Martin doing "Sway".

We ended up in a dive frequented by factory workers getting off the third shift, banging down Stock like they had found the last case in existence.

Eric weaves over to me, dragging a very happy, elderly gent in tow. He has him by the collar of what appears to be an ancient denim jacket. They lean in and Eric intones, very solemnly: "Rob, Rob, my friend, you must to help me. Please, please, this is my Uncle Stash. Please, what does his badge say in English?"

Seems they all learned English orally and nobody could read a word of it. Uncle Stash's "badge" was a vintage SF hippie button, pinned on the jacket, the kind that proliferated all clothing of the period, proclaiming stuff like: "Make Love, Not War", "Tune in, turn on, Drop out", You know.

It had been there so long, the pin was rusted into the fabric and the writing was just barely visible. Someone, perhaps the same relative who gave the band their hapless name, had, indeed, returned from the Summer of Love and bequeathed the button to Uncle Stash, who hadn't taken it off, since. And now, like the Oracle at Delphi, our hero must decipher it and reveal to Stash and company what the Gods had decreed.

They all leaned close. My eyes were about an inch from the thing. Everyone held their breath. I think the whole joint quieted down a bit.

"Eric, please tell Uncle Stash that his button says: Too Drunk to Fuck."

When Eric and boys picked themselves up off the floor and translated for Uncle Stash, you'd think he'd won the Nobel Prize. He pranced around the place, showing off his "badge" to all and sundry, proud as a banty rooster.

Hi ho, the Derrio, the Groom Cuts the Cake

A classic from the wedding band circuit. Polish wedding on the west side of Chicago. Buddy of mine was playing with Rudy, the legendary

trumpet player/ band leader. Rudy was not to be messed with. Once ,on a gig at the Drake, the leader was some piano player who refused to let Rudy off the stand to take a leak.

Rudy finally stuck his trumpet under one arm, unzips, and urinates s into the open nine foot Steinway. Society ladies fainted, it is said. Don't mess with Rudy.

So, they're playing this wedding at a Polish Dance Hall attached to the church, and they're forty minutes into the job when my friend, the bass player notices a very weird vibe has descended upon this party. The bride's family and the groom's family were sitting on opposites sides of the dance floor, in the midst of which stood a seven tiered wedding cake.

And they were glowering at each other.

By the time the Bride and Groom, who were barely speaking to each other, got up to cut the cake, it dawned on my friend that it was a shotgun wedding.

The couple are called to cut the cake and, for some reason, the maitre D, is called away just before the groom grabs the knife.

If you ever notice, the maitre D at a wedding will always direct the Groom's hand to the top or second layer to make the ritualistic incision. This is why.

With the Maitre D gone, the groom cuts into the bottom layer. Hears a thud. Tries again. Scrapes away some icing. It's cardboard. All the layers but t the top three are cardboard. He flips the table over, cake and all.

The tables empty . all of them. And I'm talking about the women yanking hair and kicking, the guys punching and kicking. It's out of a bad western.

Rudy knows his job. He wades through the melee, finds the father of the bride, who is smushing some scrawny kids face into a bowl of cottage cheese. And kicking him in the shins.

The bass player sees Rudy tap him on the shoulder. The father turns to him, nods, takes out a checkbook, writes a check, hands it to Rudy, then jumps back on the kid, who had almost successfully crawled away and commences to wail on him again,

Classic Rudy.

The Underbelly Tour of Eastern Europe

After the three night stint, we split Split (Sorry. Couldn't help it.)

Piled into two cars and roared up the coast to make a 7:00 downbeat at our concert in Zagreb, about six hours to the north. I was driving a coach built Mercedes on loan to us by the brother of our director, the Rumanian composer and NYU Prof. Dinu Ghezzo. It was me, Esther and Dinu in the Merc. Dinu's navigating.

At least we had a merc. Everyone else around there had a Skoda. The Skoda is the worst car in the world. The only thing they're good for is generating Skoda jokes, apparently.

What's the difference between a Skoda and a brothel?

It's less embarrassing to be seen getting out of a brothel at two in the morning.

What's the difference between a Skoda and a Jehovah's Witness?

It's easier to close the door on a Jehovah's Witness.

Which is actually true. It is not unusual to see some poor schlub playing the Anvil Chorus on the door to his Skoda. Bang. Bang. Bang a banga. Curse. Curse. Curse. Forget it. No way.

And here's my own offering:

What does the brass plate on the passenger side of a Skoda say?

Thank you for not smirking.

So Dinu's navigating. I'm driving the merc. And we get really lost. We make it to the park we're performing in, and slide the merc forward through a light rain, up to the stage, which is tilting slightly to starboard..

We pile out and begin hauling the gear on the stage. We're late. The audience has been waiting in the light rain for almost two hours.

They are stomping and clapping. Not just some of them, all of them.

Esther beams: "Oh, Rob. Listen to that. We've haven't played a note yet, and already they're applauding."

"Uh, Esther. We're in Eastern Europe. That kind of clapping means they're really pissed. We better start make some noise immediately because the natives are getting restless, my friend."

We make it through the gig, make it into town. Dinu has arranged a dinner

at a four star restaurant. We're seated two tables away from a general and his staff, and next to a patrician couple that reek of old money.

Now, it's about a year before the Timishwara revolt which begins as a groundswell in Rumania. By the time it topples the Ceausescu regime, it will have spread to Yugoslavia and tears it apart in several pieces, one of which becomes autonomous Croatia. We're sitting at ground zero right now and the clock is ticking.

This means the working people of Zagreb are all really angry. The rhythmic clapping might have stopped, but they were letting the upper crust have the news in other, unmistakable ways.

For example, it took forty five minutes for the waiter to bring us a menu. And this was the classiest joint in town. It took another forty five minutes for the salads to arrive. They looked like they been sat on. And, like anyone who has ever worked as a busboy, I have my own horror stories about what little garnishes the kitchen staff sprinkles on the plates of hapless customers who have somehow rubbed them the wrong way.

Yeah, I guess it was time for the worker bees to show the generals and the bluebloods what they really thought of them.

Two hours later and no one could wait any longer. The Korean flutist across from me was face down into a napkin. We left with about half of Dinu's feast still somewhere back there in the planning stages. Screw it. We're outa here.

No hot water at the hotel. No way to get food. No way to get anyone to bring anything to the room.

Next day. Sightseeing and shopping. Me and Esther walk into these posh shops, and the worker behind the counter sits there glowering, arms crossed, fuming. The thought bubble is unmistakable and requires no translation: "If I get up to wait on you, I don't get paid. If I sit here, I don't get paid. I'm not getting up for anything." Okey dokey.

A grey funk descends over scenic Zagreb, It looks like Vienna but someone took all the jelly out of its linzer tort. There is a bad mojo, here, my friend.

Next day, we make it to the train. Esther and I stare out the back window as it pulls out of the station. I expect to see the cast of "Frankenstein" round the corner any moment. Furious burghers in lieder hosen with torches and pitchforks. Find the monster. Kill the monster. We're the monster. Get me outa here.

We're enroute to Budapest, last stop on the tour. We're in the club car, desperate to order the first decent meal we've had in a week.

Then, an interesting thing begins to happen. We're about two hours away from crossing the border into Hungary and strange people begin to slip furtively into the dining car. Guy walks up to me, slides his greasy jacket sleeve up to his elbow. He's got six phony Rolexes strapped to his arm. They're ticking away and they're all for sale.

And the bad watches aren't the only thing that's ticking away. We learn that the wads and wads of Yugoslavian Kronen we have in our pockets and didn't have time to change into Hungarian money is about to turn into garbage. It becomes absolutely worthless the second we hit the Hungarian border.

A weird, swelling aura of Bacchanalia drifts through the dining car. People appear hawking bottles of expensive wine ("Gimme two!!"), Ladies handbags from Paris (Esther bought three), bootleg VHS tapes of forgotten films that suddenly look quite diverting ("Cantinflas Meets Gidget"? Haven't seen that one. I'll take it!!")

Before long, the wine is flowing. People have ordered several entrees and desserts each, and they are being passed around. It's become a night of ancient Roman excess. Buy! Consume!. The border is only a half hour away.!

We got off at the main rail station in Budapest. Now, you have to be very careful in making it from the train to your hotel. What you must watch out for as you walk through the terminal is the Gypsies. The gypsies have about fifty ways to rip you off, most of them so deft, you won't even know your stuff is missing 'till you're out the door.

Although, some are less subtle than others. I arrived at a symphony conducting workshop in Zlin in the Czech Republic and met a fellow conductor who was still shaking from an experience he had in the very train station through which I am now walking.

He was changing trains enroute to Zlin, steaming through the terminus in a big hurry, a fat American Samsonite suitcase in each hand.

Standing directly in his path was a small waif of a girl in a babushka, holding a baby. As he pulls up to within four feet of her, she tosses the baby at him in a little arc. He drops the bags and just manages to catch the infant in time.

As the baby lands in his arms, two boys emerge from behind the curtain of a do it yourself photo booth, swipe the bags, and vanish. He's left standing

there, a proud new papa! Mazel Tov!!

The cops come, take the baby. This scam happens all the time. The cops (who are probably in on it) know that someone from the Rom family will show up at the station house in a few hours and re-claim the kid. That baby gets passed around like a box of Christmas candy.

Yeah. These are the kinds of things that happen on the Underbelly Tour.

The Sun'll Come Out, Tomaro!

It was late August of 1989. My marriage would be over in two weeks, but I didn't know that, then.

I was busy composing a Concerto for Electric Guitar and Orchestra. It was commissioned by Randall Craig Fleisher, the Assistant Conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra in D.C.

That summer, he was serving as Leonard Bernstein's Assistant at the Tanglewood Music Festival in Massachusetts. He invited my wife and I to come up for a few days to work on the piece with him.

Wendy was at a playwrighting retreat in upstate New York. I picked her up on the way. Now, I could tell something was wrong, but I'll be damned if I could figure out what it was. We just kept on talking to see if we could suss it out.

Got to Tanglewood and checked into a cheesy motel for the three days we were there. By the time we arrived, we were barely speaking.

Next morning Randy and I are scheduled to work on the piece, then he's with Maestro Bernstein, who is rehearsing the Tanglewood Festival Orchestra. Tchaikovsky 4th Symphony.

Wendy and I wake up after a fitful and sleepless night. Words are exchanged. I invite her to come to the rehearsal. She won't budge. Sitting there on the bed behind her little Toshiba laptop, writing her latest magnum opus, lost in her world, which is rapidly veering away from my world, it seems. Two planetoids whose orbits no longer intersect in the way they once did.

More words; "So, you accepted Randy's invitation. We came all the way up here, and now you're just gonna stay in this room the whole time? What's up with that?"

Wrong thing to say. Next thing I know, I'm sidestepping a flying tube of Crest toothpaste. Full tube, too. It would have left a mark.

I split. But now, I realize something. I know what's wrong.

Me. I'm wrong. Everything about me is wrong. I can see it in her eyes. We're in deep kimchee, my friend.

The festival orchestra is made up of the best eighteen year old players in the country, who've auditioned from everywhere for the chance to be conducted by Leonard Bernstein.

Bernstein was in the last year of his life, but, like me and my marriage, he didn't know that then.

He had changed everything in American classical music culture. Before him, there were no American born symphony conductors conducting major American orchestras. All the music directors were European. He broke that glass ceiling. He was the first "serious" classical figure to compose for Broadway, to write jazz, to write Rock music, symphonies. He did syndicated music education shows for kids. Guy did it all.

I mean, he wrote "West Side Story," for God's sake, which, by the way, did not win the Tony Award for best new musical in 1958 when it opened on Broadway. That honor went to "The Music Man", because how can you compare so slight an offering as "Tonight" when it finds itself up against Buddy Hackett singing "Shapoopee"?

Bernstein was also crazy at this point. He had been pushing the envelope for so long that he was addicted to the juice of the push itself. Sexual boundaries, social, political, musical boundaries: bring 'em on. Lenny took on all comers.

Sam Adler, a great conductor who was also at Tanglewood that summer, told me about what had happened the week before I arrived. People were still freaked out about it.

There was some society lady who had composed a symphony and got it recorded and had made Bernstein promise to come to her evening lawn party soirée to listen to it and make some comments.

Night of the party, all of the upper crust of Tanglewood classical music society is there. Party goes on and on. No Bernstein. Finally shows at one AM, in a flowing opera cape, with retinue of young boys in tow. Drunk. Got that look in his eye. Don't mess with me.

After some serious arm twisting on behalf of the blue bloods, he agrees to listen to the recording and look at the score, but he's clearly not happy about the imposition.

He sprawls out on the lawn, still in the cape. The music comes over the speakers. He's got his face deep in the score. Listens to the whole thing. Everyone applauds at the end and holds their breath as the Oracle rises up on one elbow and prepares to pronounce sentence, and Sam's thinking he really, really don't like the look in Lenny's eye right now.

It speaks:

"Lady, tell me something. When you fuck, do you cum?"

Huge intake of breath from all assembled. Adler hustles over. Time to reel him in before the shit jumps off any further.

"Lenny, maybe it's time we..."

"No, Sam no!! I just want to know. Lady, do you cum when you fuck?"

The composer lady is pole axed. Doesn't know where to turn.

"Because there's a whole lot of fucking in this piece and no cumming at all!"

That's it. Finita de la Commedia. Adler and the boys scoop him up and pour him back into the limo.

That kind of thing was not real unusual by this time.

So, now I'm at the rehearsal along with a few others who were invited to watch.

Two rows in front of me is Bobby McFerrin. He has people on both sides of him who are pointing passages in a huge conductor's score of the Tchaik symphony, which is funny because Bobby doesn't read music.

I look at him and I see that he is scared shitless. Terror in his eyes.

Later, I find out some genius had reasoned that, since Bobby could make the sounds of an entire orchestra just with his mouth, why not have him actually conduct an orchestra? How entertaining! So, they got him a guest conducting gig with the San Francisco Symphony that was scheduled to take place in, like, a week from now. Tchaik 4.

Guy knew he was screwed. Guy knew he was in way over his head. Serious panic in his eyes. Oh, well. Just keep on smiling and shuffling and making your mouth noises. And, oh yeah: don't worry, Be happy, you fraud.

Lenny comes out on stage and waves to the kids, nods to the few of us scattered in the huge outdoor auditorium call The Shed.

He's wearing five hundred dollar Tony Lama cowboys boots, black chinos and a burgundy T shirt with something printed on it that I can't quite make out because it's faded almost away.

I wouldn't find out what the T shirt said until twenty years later, which is now.

I'm a symphony conductor now in the Midwest. I got a videotape of Bernstein rehearsing Stravinsky's Le Sacre de Printemps (The Rite of Spring) with the Schleswig- Holstein Festival orchestra in Germany (also eighteen year old musicians and incredibly good ones, at that).

The video was filmed two years before the summer I saw him at Tanglewood . On the tape, he comes into the rehearsal and takes off his windbreaker and immediately launches into the story behind the T shirt to the orchestra of kids assembled before him. The writing on the T shirt says: "Hunky Brute".

Seems he was rehearsing the New York Philharmonic a few years before that, preparing to go on tour with the Tchaikovsky Sixth Symphony (Pathetique) and he wasn't getting the powerful sound he wanted in the last movement from the trombone section.

So, Lenny yells out: “That’s it? That’s all you’re going to give me, you bunch of hunky brutes?”

Next morning, he comes in the stage door to Carnegie Hall and the entire trombone section is lined up wearing their brand new Hunky Brute T shirts. They gave him one. Made him an honorary hunky brute. He was very proud of that T shirt, you could tell.

So, now, here we are in the summer of 1989 about to see the Tchaik 4 rehearsal. Mind you, I’m a composer and guitarist in graduate school at NYU. It never occurred to me to try my hand at conducting. Never in a million years. All that was about to change.

Bernstein gives the downbeat for the gigantic brass fanfare that starts the piece and I thought the top of my head was gonna come off.

I had never heard anything as passionate, as powerful, as filled with unresolved longing, as his conducting of the first movement of this Tchaikovsky Symphony. I was stunned. Flummoxed. Where did this come from? How did it flow into this guy and out over the orchestra, like a warm wave of aching bliss.? You could almost see it. It was palpable.

Something shifted inside me. Don’t ask me how, but right then I knew I was gonna wind up being a symphonic conductor, which is crazy. You might as well hear me say that right then I knew I was gonna wind up being the King of Siam. It made just as little sense as that, but there you have it.

He’s happy with the kids. You can tell. He corrects some intonation issues with the bassoons, adjusts some string phrasing and goes on to the next movement.

The second movement begins with a beautiful oboe solo on a Russian folk melody. More ache. More longing. You can’t beat the Russians for cranking up the angst.

The oboe solo, which, by the way, was being nailed by what had to be the world’s best eighteen year old oboist, was accompanied by a padding part in the strings, just long, held notes. Nothing to it.

But Bernstein kept stopping it and starting it again. There was something missing. Something he was getting from the kids.

Finally, he puts the stick down on the stand and turns to the orchestra. What he’s about to tell them was clearly meant just for them,

but I can't help but overhear it.

"You know, in speaking of accompaniment; when everyone on stage cares about what everyone else is playing, that creates a feeling of love on the stage, and when that happens, that 's what makes this music happen. Let's try it again."

He gives the downbeat and it's completely different, completely transformed. A Russian landscape seems to materialize onstage like a winter scene somehow left out of Doctor Zhivago. The kids really listened to him.

Now, nobody can talk to an orchestra like that. Nobody can make that speech. It's too hokey, too sentimental. But Lenny could. And he did. And that ingenuous charm, that integrity, nobody could come close to that.

And now, now there's a big Lenny shaped hole in the world, man, and nothing's gonna fill it.

Half way through the movement, I start cying and I can't stop. I turn to Randy. He's crying. We're both sitting there just bawling. I guess we each had our reasons.

Me? Was I crying because it was so wonderful? Was I crying because my marriage to my beautiful wife was turning into dust half a mile away in a shitty motel room? Was the music mixing around inside me, jumbling around, until both those things collided? Take your pick.

The rehearsal ends. Bernstein is holding court onstage, chatting happily with the kids, a towel around his neck soaking up the sweat, a Kool cigarette half forgotten in his left hand, which is describing in big sweeping arcs whatever point he is making to the kids.

He turns around and peers into the audience, catches Randy's eye. That's it. Randy jumps up: "Time for you to meet Lenny, Rob." And he scampers up on stage.

Now, I've known about Leonard Bernstein all my life. I was one of those kids who grew up watching the Omnibus television series he wrote and starred in: "Think of this melody in this Beethoven symphony as a train, kids, and its' getting closer and closer!"

He nods to Randy. Randy gestures for me to come up on to the stage.

So, what will the Oracle say? You wait your whole life to meet someone like this. Surely, I was about to learn something that would be shattering, life altering. “When everybody cares, that’s what makes the music happen.” I didn’t have to write that down, man. I knew I would never forget that.

I’m really nervous. I walk to the conductor’s podium, on which he is lounging, slumped comfortably in a kind of high class bar chair in front of the music stand. He’s lighting another Kool as I approach.

“Lenny, this is my friend Rob Tomaro that I told you about. We’re writing a piece for Electric Guitar and Orchestra”

He considers this, or he is considering something. He squinches up his brow. He turns to me. Speak, Oracle, speak.

“Tomaro. Tomaro? You mean like that song?”

Then, he throws his head back and sings, in the worst voice I have ever heard issue from a human throat:

“The sun’ll come out, tomorrow. Bet your bottom dollarrrrrrr.....”

I was stunned. Here I was, meeting the Oracle, and he just made the same bad joke about my name that everyone, but I mean everyone makes when they meet me for the first time. And, like, everyone else, he thinks he’s thinking of it for the first time.

The Oracle is human. Just human, with oracular overtones which overtake him once in a while. Dig that.

And then he’s gone.

I go back to the motel room.. She’s still on the bed, gripping the Toshiba like it’s a life preserver, like if she lets go of it , she’ll drown.

‘You want drama? You want theater? You should have come with me to that rehearsal. Bernstein is the living embodiment of theater. That’s where the theater is up here. It’s certainly not in this terrible little room, Wendy.”

Two weeks later, it’s Labor Day, September 4th. I’m crying again, only this time I know why. I’m driving Wendy through the Lincoln tunnel to the Port Authority bus station. She’s leaving me. And I’m driving her to the bus she’s leaving me on. Freakin’ co-dependent, that’s what that is.

I'm bawling. I pull up in front of Port Authority and cut into the taxi cab line. I get out the driver's side and look back. The cabbies are coming out on to the curb. They're ready to cut my neck off. Then, they look at my face, and they all just get back in their cabs.

Last thing I remember, I got her bags on the curb. I'm looking up at her: "Baby, are you gonna be OK?" Last thing I said to my wife, I swear. How co-dependent is that? Sheesh.

Driving back through the tunnel to Hoboken, I think back over the past few weeks. I try to unravel all the knots in my head. I try to discern what benighted set of circumstances could have possibly dropped me on this particular doorstep in life. Didn't have a clue.

Then, somewhere dimly in the back on my mind, I heard Lenny singing that song. Had to laugh.

Yeah, the sun'll come out, Tomaro.. Bet your bottom dollar. It just ain't comin' out today.

Uppercut

Boxer friend of mine says it's an easy punch to defend. You slip it, push the glove aside, and counter.

Tell that to Spinks. April, 1987. Atlantic City. Ref is reciting the rules in the ring before the fight as Spinks stands toe to toe with Tyson.

This is not the Tyson of 2004, the ear biter, convicted rapist, bloated, incoherent has been. In 1987, nobody wanted to get in the ring with him, so lethal, so bloodlessly cold was he.

Tyson. A childhood spent in withering neglect and abandonment, all festering in a slightly unhinged mind. Taken under the wing of genius boxing Coach Cus Damato, who legally adopted him and got him out of Brooklyn.

"Cus, what do you think of your new prospect?"

“I think he hits with bad intentions.”

Truer word never spoken, fight fans.

Cus turns him into a lethal instrument. Mix that training with two parts pent up fury and Voila, Monsieur!, I give you ze disaster cocktail served over ice. Want a sip?

I think not.

John Lennon said if you wanted to call Rock and Roll by another name, you could just call it Chuck Berry. If you wanted to call boxing by another name between 1983 and 1993, you could call it Tysoning.

I'm at the Westbank Café in 1985. I turn around at the bar just as Tyson walks by. He is in conversation with another cat.

I had to say something, anything. Mike Tyson was walking right past me:

“Hey man. What's happening?”

Keeps on walking and talking to his friend. Then, he stops. He comes back, nods and says; “What's happening?”

So now, what is that? It's courtesy. It's manners. He came back because he knew I would be hurt or whatever if he snubbed me. So, now I'm writing this, not that.

I'm watching the Atlantic City bout on the tube in Hoboken with my troops. We been waiting for this for weeks. Had the chips and dips, the beer. Boys night out. Told all of our old ladies to chill.

Spinks and Tyson are toe to toe and the ref is talking. And I can see, clearly see from my buddy's barca lounge that, one hundred miles south of us, in that ring, Spinks is gripped by a deep fear. A primal fear.

.”Guys. Look at Spinks. Look at his eyes.”

Yeah. We could see it, but Tyson could smell it. Somewhere deep in that troubled, prehensile, reptilian brain, Tyson knew it was over. The rest was just a ballet. Turn, turn, kick, turn. Skip to my loo. All over.

The bell rings.

Tyson comes out like a bull, like he always does. Bumps into his man in the center of the ring. . Jams Spinks up inside. Spinks is tapping him on the shoulders, tippy tap, tippy tap. May I have this dance?

Tyson finds the opening between Spinks' gloves. Plants his feet. Launches an upper cut that comes from somewhere underground. Up from the bowels. This punch probably flashed past James Mason fighting dinosaurs down there in "Journey to the Center of the Earth."

It lifts Spinks up at least three inches off the ground, both feet. Toes pointed elegantly at the floor. Pauses in mid air like Nureyev. His jaw is racked back and up.

His mouth protector pops up into the Jersey night like the Space Shuttle. Boop.

Have a nice day. Don't forget your waitress.

Flat on his back. No movement. Tyson stalks back to his corner. Day at the office. Little disappointed. He wanted to play with his food before he ate it.

Thirty seconds into round one.

Scene in Hoboken: Stunned. I'm holding my first guacamole laden chip in my left hand, my Bud in my right, and the shit is over. Over.

"Hi. Honey. What are you doing home so early?"

What to say?. Spinks shouldn't have gotten outa bed that morning.

Which brings to mind a line from another press conference:

"Champ, when did you know you had him in trouble?"

(Champ looks up. Leans into the mic)

“When he signed the contract”

Ah the sweet science.

Just Feel it.

My brother in law is a jazz drummer and ad hoc assistant to Joe Morello who played with Dave Brubeck Quartet. Morello did the famous drum solo on Take Five in the fifties. It was at that time that his sight began to fail.

Brubeck and his group were invited to perform a suite for jazz band and orchestra at Carnegie hall with Leonard Bernstein. They had been waiting for the whole week leading up to the performance for Bernstein to rehearse their piece, but Lenny apparently felt it unnecessary. To Lenny, Jazz had to be spontaneous, improvised, for it to be authentic' so he used the orchestra's rehearsal time to address the other pieces on the program.

Night of the performance, Lenny and Brubeck were standing in the offstage right wing in their white dinner jackets. The rest of the quartet were onstage with the orchestra arrayed behind them. Brubeck was nearly apoplectic.

“maestro, how are we gonna do this? We haven’t even gone through it once”

They were given the cue to enter. Brubeck went first. Bernstein was the picture of relaxed cool

“ Dave, don’t worry about it. It’s jazz. Just feel it.”

“But what about the section when the band has to suddenly stop for the orchestral interlude/”

“Just have your drummer look at me.”

They were both in mid bow to the exultant audience when Brubeck, looked over to Lenny and said:

“My drummer’s blind”

Lenny stared at him in horror:

“Oh,nooooooooo!!!”

it happened just like that, said Joe Morello.

When Pushkin Comes to Shovekin

“Dear God! Please! You’ve got to help me. I have no idea what I’m doing.”

I whispered those words into the night sky. I was standing on the loading dock behind the Roselyn High School auditorium in Long Island on a warm April night in 1989. I had on a brand new tuxedo. I was holding a little white stick with a cork handle. I was in serious trouble.

After my epiphany at Tanglewood, the one in which I had a revelation that I was destined to become a symphony conductor (was I nuts?), I enrolled in a conducting class as part of my curriculum at NYU. I was beginning my Ph.D. in Composition and this course was being offered just this once. I jumped at the chance.

After about three weeks of classes, the Professor, who was also the Music Director of the NYU Symphony, asked me to stay after class.

“I want you to consider applying for the position of Assistant Conductor of the orchestra. It comes with a salary and tuition remission on your Ph. D. program.”

“Whoa. Maestro, thank you for the offer but, really, I’m a composer and a jazz guitarist and I actually don’t know the symphonic repertoire. I couldn’t tell you the difference between a Beethoven symphony and a Schubert Symphony.”

“Don’t worry about that. You’ll learn one piece at a time, just like in jazz. And, I’ll help you.”

He was a good guy. He told the story of how he gave Billy Joel his first piano lessons back in Hicksville.

I got the Graduate Assistantship. And I began studying conducting with Professor Rudoff.

Now, I didn’t know much, there seemed to be something very odd about his approach to conducting technique.

He was a youth orchestras conductor. He developed a system of gestures that was fool proof for keeping large groups of kids playing together without it falling apart.

He swung his arms in wide arcs around and around. I am sure he got the kids’ attention. I couldn’t help thinking, though, that if you stuck little flags in his hands, he would look like he was signaling from the deck of a ship in semaphore code. Bravo. Yankee. Bravo. Yankee.

It didn’t look anything like what Leonard Bernstein was doing last summer.

After a few lessons, he told me I was going to conduct the opening piece on a Spring “run out” concert in Roselyn, the overture to Mozart’s Opera Don Giovanni.

So, here I was, sweating it out on the loading dock, ten minutes before I had to go on.

I walked on stage. Place was packed. Mounted the podium. It’s now or never. I brought the stick down on the huge D minor chord that

begins the overture.

There's a massive wave of sound. A bolt of energy surges up my spine. Kundalini. Blasts in to my skull in a paroxysm of bliss.

That's was it. I knew then that I would do anything, anything, to feel that again.

Made it through the overture with no major gaffs.

I also knew I would have to find a real conducting teacher.

Found out about Vladimir Kin, a Russian expatriate conductor living at the Manhattan Plaza complex.

Maestro Kin agreed to see me.

I entered his apartment. His wife showed me into his studio. He rose from the piano bench and came towards me. He stopped a foot away and glared at me eye to eye. I knew that look.

You know how a musician can tell if someone he's just met is a player or a fraud? By looking at him. Don't know why, but there you have it. Musicians can smell a phony like a dog smells meat.

He had long white hair and a white beard. Club foot with a big, black built up shoe on one leg. Very dramatic. Very Russian. Like something out of a Pushkin novel .

"Let me see your hands."

He took my hands, very gently.. He wiggled my fingers around. He began rubbing his thumb in the lines of my palm like he might find diamond dust.

"Let me see you work."

He made me conduct the opening of the Tchaikovsky Fourth symphony. He sat at the piano and played it from memory while I conducted him as if he was the whole orchestra. After about five minute of this, he stopped playing, grunted, and waved me into a chair.

" I take you."

Now, at least I had a chance. A chance to study with a real conductor.

The first thing he told me to do was to go to the New York City Opera later that week to see Valery Gergiev conduct The Queen of Spades, the best Tchaikovsky opera.

Wonderful. Lush, sweeping arc of a score. Tale of treachery, greed, and revenge. Can't beat the Russians for that stuff.

So, we begin.

"Maestro, please. These tempo markings in the finale of the Shostakovich Fifth don't make sense to me. They are unplayably fast."

"Good!...Good you got that... And here is why, Rob. Shostakovich would compose late at night with cup of tea next to telephone at kitchen table. Valise, packed, next to window. Ready to jump out back if it comes knock at door. Two in the morning knock at door, it is not pretty girl with flowers, I promise you.

Phone rings at all hours. It is his publishers. Always call. 'Maestro, what is tempo for the Allegro at letter H? What is tempo for Andante ?

Shostakovich was convinced publishers work for KGB. So, he makes up first number comes into his head and hangs up phone. So, tempos in Fifth Symphony are crazy."

"Shostakovich is sitting next to me at rehearsal of his Leningrad symphony (No. 7). Stupid conductor in front of orchestra. Shostakovich looking at his score, shaking of his head: ' You know, my first impression of the conductor....this is a man who interferes with the work of another man... and you know, that was my second impression also. Ha Ha ha Ha!' "

Whenever a lesson got a little dull, I would say the magic word and he would go into his act.

"Maestro, I'm preparing the Barber Adagio for Strings. I think the best recording is the 1965 Bernstein with the...."

Up out of the chair. Stomping in a circle. Club foot hammering the floor. Arms waving. Roaring:

"Bernstein!! Bernstein" Hoo hoo hoo! Hoo hoo hoo! He cries! He cries. He hops up and down and he cries! " Fingers clawing his cheeks, tracing the path of Lenny's crocodile tears as they flow down his

face.

When he's tired, he plops down in front of me. Huge hand grips my knee. Feels like a gopher being crushed by an eagle.

Leans in. Grabs my score and stabs it with his finger.

"Rob, the composer has put the tears into the music. But it is not there for you and me. It is for the people. For the audience."

He gives me back my score. He whispers:

"Rob, we must let the audience have the tears."

In the Russian school of conducting, the act of standing on the podium before the orchestra carries a sacred trust. Like a high priest presiding over a secret Temple of sound.

Maestro would intone this, like a blessing, like a mantra:

"The conductor must be still on the podium. He must emanate... ..ar - ...tis- tic.. at..mos-..phere. It must come out of him and seep out over the orchestra, and then seep out over the audience, but no one should know where it is coming from. Artistic atmosphere must be there."

The prototypical Russian conductor in this regard was Evgeny Mvransky, who ruled the St. Petersburg Orchestra for fifty years with an iron hand. To illustrate how pervasive his influence was, Maestro said:

"One day, the orchestra was rehearsing under the baton of a guest conductor. Unexpectedly, Mvransky slipped into the back of the hall to observe the rehearsal. When the orchestra realized he was present, I could hear the sound begin to change. Even though they were being conducted by a different man, their sound transformed into the "Mvransky" sound in five minutes, because Maestro was there."

On a video tape, you can see him, his face rigid as concrete. He stops them:

"My friends. The notes are there. The tone is there. This we know. But where is the warmth? Where is the fellow feeling? Perhaps we must ship in a specialist, someone who can teach us these things?"

Maestro Kin had his own vocabulary which he used to express subtle emotions that must be evoked from the orchestra. When preparing

me to conduct the Sibelius First Symphony, he addressed a particularly muted and moody section in the first movement:

“Rob, here....here.... you must make it sound, like, half awake and half asleepy.” I loved that.

He was struggling all the time to come up with engagements, just to eke out a living, this great artist. Such a shame.

I finished studying with him in 1992 and we lost touch for a few years.

Then, I heard that he had been appointed Music Director of the Seoul, South Korea Orchestra. I was so happy for him. A few weeks later, I called to congratulate him.

“Hello, Mrs. Kim. Is Maestro there?”

Deep sob.

“Rob....Rob.... Vladimir...dead!”

He had suffered a fatal heart attack the weeks before. It came out of the blue. I had no idea what was to become of Mrs. Kim, alone in Manhattan without Vladimir.

Now, though, whenever I feel the surge of that special feeling on the podium, that feeling that he described, I offer a little prayer of thanks to Maestro Kim:

“Maestro, here it is. Just as you said it would appear. An artistic atmosphere.”

Duet

I grew up in Maplewood, New Jersey. My parents belonged to the Maplewood Country Club. When my dad's best friend, Marty Zuckerman, applied for membership so he could play golf with my father, he was turned down. He was Jewish. No Jews at the MCC. My dad, who rarely made a scene about anything, went ballistic.

He explained to the Board that if they didn't let Marty in, he would walk out and take all of his friends with him. That was all it took to end the anti-semitic policy at the Club. Forty years later, many of the member families are Jewish. My Dad, the civil rights activist. Who knew?

After coming back to the East Coast from Chicago, I started playing club dates. Earlier that week, I was horrified to learn that I was assigned to the band that was playing the Maplewood Country Club. Try as I might to stay hidden behind my amplifier, every once in a while a pale face would float by dancing and recognize me. You could see the look in their eyes and the unspoken comment: "Jeez, is that Pat Tomaro's kid playing in the band?" It was clear nobody thought I had achieved greatness in life.

On the first break, I was in the foyer with the sax player, who wasn't that good. First time I was on a gig with him. Already handed me his card, which I made a mental note to toss on my way out. Why is it the crappy players are always the first ones asking you for work?

He was sprawled out in an overstuffed leather club chair with brass studs and ball and claw feet. Very old English. He said:

"Did you hear the new Sonny Rollins record, man?"

"I...."

"So, this is the Maplewood Country Club. Halls of power. Domain of the landed gentry of Essex County. It don't look like much to me. "

I sipped my vodka and tonic.

"The bandleader tells me you grew up here."

I nodded.

"So, this place must hold a lot of memories for you."

"Yeah, most of which I've done quite well to forget."

"Why's that?"

"Growing up stuff. Adolescent angst."

"Like what?"

"Like, the girls who went here wouldn't date me."

"Little late to cry about it now, man. Rich chicks all suck in bed anyway, man."

Maybe I should tell him. No.

He went on.

" I come from Newark. We didn't belong to a country club. You shouldn't front the fact that you had it easy as a kid. You should own up to it, man. But guess what? We're both playing in a wedding band now, man. Dig that."

What is it about sax players? Maybe all that huffing and puffing popped their brains loose in their skulls.

Alright,, if he wanted real, why not give him real? I took another sip, then I laid it on him.

"Then, there's that chair."

"This chair?"

I just looked at him.

"What about this chair?"

Kept looking at him.

"What about this chair? What's the matter with this chair, man? There's nothin' wrong with this chair, man." He scooped down deeper into it, demonstrating its comfortableness. He wiggled his ass back and forth.

"My mother died in that chair."

His ass stopped wiggling.

.What did you say?"

"My mother died in that chair."

He leapt up like he had been bitten on the nuts by a wolverine.

"Holy crap, man! Are you trying to mess with my head?!!"

"Nope. On October 12, 1987, she drove up to that door in her 1980 burgundy Mercury Capri, gave the keys to the valet, and came in to make a brunch date with her friends. Walked up to the coat check girl and said: "Call me an ambulance. I'm dying" . Then, she sat in that chair and expired."

So, how's the new Sonny Rollins record?"

Vashtau!

Rhymes with Frosh- claw! Little something I got to know intimately in the summer of '91.

Another tour with the New York University Contemporary Ensemble, performing experimental, artsy stuff for the University crowd. I was conducting the group and playing the electric guitar parts, most of which sounded like a small plane crashing into a bus.

Six of us landed in Helsinki and did a live bit on Finnish Radio at midnight. Caught a little plane the next day, which wafted us 300 klicks north to Kaijanus, a wealthy logging town near the Russian border, to perform at the Kaijani American Music Days Festival.

I was escorted to my dressing room in a huge new theater for the dress rehearsal. Following that, we were supposed to get a few hours rest at the lodge, a state dinner, then we hit at about 9:00 that night.

Walking to the car after the rehearsal, my assistant (dig that, they assigned me an assistant) asked me if everything was to my liking with the dressing room. Yeah, I said, it's swell. Too bad though, that I didn't get a chance to use the little sauna that was attached to the bathroom. That would have be cool.

He nodded and we got into the car, which took us to a cocktail party.

Leaving the party, he points me to a different car. Says he's got a little surprise for me. The other cars take off for the hotel, but mine slides down a dirt road that follows the Kaijanus River to the north. The sun is sort of going down. It's always sort of going down or sort of coming up. Never really gets anywhere.

Car winds down a path to the river and stops in front of a small lodge with smoke coming out of a stone chimney. Standing in front is Pekka (they're all named Pekka), a jolly, 50 something, rotund guy with one normal eye and one milky eye that was always fixated on something up and to the left. He was one of our hosts and the Finnish Ambassador to somewhere. He was grinning and holding a bunch of towels. Looks like I was gonna get my sauna, after all.

I follow Pekka into the sauna, which is, like, 110 degrees. He strips. I follow (birthday) suit. Sit there on the cedar bench soaking in the heat, sweat coming from every pour.

"If we wanted to have the real sauna experience, Maestro, we would now jump in the river"

Who am I to argue with tradition?

"After you, P."

Buck naked, we go out on the dock, which extends about ten feet into the river.

"My wife made me promise to ask you to watch me go in first, since my last heart attack."

"Knock yourself out, man. I got your back."

He looks up and down the river, winds up, and lumbers down the dock, launches himself aloft and comes down in a perfect cannonball.

Pops up like a cork, laughing. "The water is perfect, Maestro. Your turn, now."

Not to be outdone, I rev up, start my run, jump up and out, and, just as I'm about to fold everything up into the cannonball, a speed boat roars by filled with giggling girls. I have just enough time to see them pointing at my dick and laughing when I hit the water.

The water is about 33 degrees. My nuts, which seem to be much craftier at self preservation than my brain, are sucked instantly back up into my ball sack cavity, like jellybeans being vacuumed up off the floor the day after Easter.

I bounce off the river like it was a sidewalk and back on to the dock. Whimpering and shivering, I limp back into the sauna.

Pekka, flushed and happy, joins me on the bench, slaps me on the back with huge ham of a hand: "Now, you're a real Fin!!"

Time for the Coups de Gras. He produces two sheaths of birch branches. They are called Vashtau. You beat yourself about the neck and back with them, screaming and laughing. The vashtau releases the birch scent in the sauna and breaks tiny capillaries beneath the skin, causing endorphins to flow to the brain, producing a glow of intoxication. In ten minutes, P and I are giggling and drooling like we dropped acid. My tongue is hanging out. His milky eye is rolling around in its socket like a marble.

"Jesus, P, where did you get those things on, like, twenty minutes notice?"

"When my wife learned that the American Maestro was coming for sauna, she went into the woods to cut the Vashtau herself, telling me: Sauna without Vashtau is nothing, nothing!"

An hour later I was poured into my tuxedo, loose as an invertebrate. Goofy smile on my face, which was red as a beet. I could have bounced off the pavement from three stories up and walked away like a cat.

Propped up on the dais at the head table at the state dinner, I stared straight ahead in a stupor. Thirty boys and girls dressed as Roaring Twenties gangsters and their flapper molls ran in to the accompaniment of Dixieland music. They leapt and flitted around the ballroom, doing the Charleston in manic, deadly earnest.

Then, a kind of mental twitch goes through the room and all the American and Finnish diplomats bolt for the exits like they were on fire.

It was the weekend of the Gorbachov putsch. Tanks and insurgents in Moscow, making a play for the Kremlin.

Seeing as how the Russians have invaded Finland about every thirty years for the last three hundred years, and seeing as how we were sitting in a banquet hall about 150 klicks from the Russian border, everyone took a real interest in what was being played out on the streets of Moscow.

But I got the sauna, and I developed a mean over the shoulder set of back hand chops with a sheaf of Vashtau.

Coltrane Barbie

It was time to rev up another European stint with the NYU Contemporary Ensemble.

The most interesting character on that gig was Dr. Esther Lamneck, a professor at NYU, the director of the ensemble, a world class classical clarinet soloist, a great avant garde jazz player and, generally, my favorite partner in crime on the road.

She found this ax in a shop in Budapest, the Tarogato, a very raw and wild predecessor of the clarinet. Sounded somewhere between a soprano sax and the alpine horn from Siegfried. Had a tone that seemed to rise up from the waters of the Nibelungs. She could make that thing walk, talk, and make you toast in the morning.

Just before we left for France, I went to a concert Esther was doing at Merkin. An evening of classical clarinet pieces with a chamber orchestra. I had my friend Joe with me, great guy and a big deal Broadway conductor. Knew his onions. Joe had never heard Esther play.

After it's over, Esther comes back onstage for an encore. Gonna switch gears and do some "avant garde" jazz with the group's piano player. Tarogato in hand.

Joe snickers derisively at this announcement. Here's why.

Esther was wearing a purple ball gown with giant poofy sleeves. Thing was a drunken Bayonne bridesmaid's nightmare. Her kupie doll smile was not right. Her dimples only added to the suburban diletante China Doll beef. Her

heavily lacquered blonde bouffant do, complete with flips at the bottom scooping out to port and starboard, would be the envy of Judy Jetson.

So, where does she get off doing a jazz encore? Joe's chortling was understandable.

Just before she put that thing in her mouth, I leaned over to him and whispered: "Check this out: Looks like Barbie. Plays like Coltrane."

Then, she blew.

Joe looked like the cat in the Fed Ex commercial with his hair blown back and his tie flapping perpendicular to his head. She was killin'.

So, we go to France. We're doing a concert at the Conservatoire Natiionale de Paris. Where Debussy and Ravel got their sheepskins and won their Prix de Romes.

Then a day off, then a concert at a jazz club in Le Marie (the fourth and funkiest arrondissement, my favorite).

It would be too prosaic for NYU to just put us up in a hotel in town, so our director, the famous Rumanian composer and fraud Dinu Ghezzo, arranges for a free stay at the home of a "Countess". We never found out if she was a real countess but her crib was the shit (in jazz parlance: wonderful, the living end, the ultimate).

It was about twenty miles outside Paris. We spent the first week rehearsing, beginning around 3:00 in the afternoon and ending around midnight, which was good, because Esther and me never got the hang of the froggy time zone.

Best way to get with the program is just to get on the schedule, but we never did. We would be up bouncing off the walls, jamming and raiding the Countess' liquor cabinet until 6:00 A.M., then they would have to shake us awake at three in the afternoon, then we repeated the whole thing. Freaking vampires, the both of us.

The only time we made it to Paris in the first week was for the concert at Le Conservatoire, which was alright, if a little stiff. Then straight back to the suburb to the manse. No pernod, no French night life, nothin'.

Me e and Esther finally had enough of that noise. We split. Caught the train to Parea and had a blast. Dinner, drinks, walking around Monmartre, the whole shot.

'Round midnight, we figure we better get back, so we find the train station.

Then, we realize there are several things we do not know:

We do not know the name of the town we're staying in.

We do not know the Countess's last name.

We do not know the street name or the address of the royal manse.

We don't know shit.

If you think this is impossibly stupid and irresponsible, dear reader, then there are no jazz musicians in your family, so Mazel Tov to you.

Keeping our eyes glued to the station signs as they fly by, we actually managed to get off the train at the right stop.

We're standing at the train stop as the three other disembarking passengers make their way to their cars.

Then, it's just the crickets and the great void. It's two thirty in the morning and we're screwed, royally.

Another passenger comes off the train, a lady. Walks over and asks if we needed help. Thank God Esther had some serviceable French. The lady offers to give us a ride and to help us find the joint. So, to all of you who think the French are rude and inhospitable, dig this:

With Esther feeding her a stream of descriptive phrases about the house (I think I caught the words shutters, gables, and little wrought iron fence) we start zoning in on it in ever tightening concentric circles, like movie Nazis in the radio truck homing in on the signal from the resistance fighters.

Summoning God knows what Gallic nerve, the lady gets out of the car, bangs on peoples' doors, describes the Countess's crib, and doesn't get shot.

Then, we found it.

Turns out the lady has a twenty year old son who is a jazz nut, so we spiff her some tickets to Le Madigan for the gig the next night. She shows with the kid in tow and Esther and I dedicate "Don't Get Around Much Anymore" to her.

Another lady comes out of the audience that night. Invites me and Esther over for dinner to meet a famous French composer, Pascal Dusapin, who I had actually heard of. We say sure. Another excuse to come back into town.

Next night, we get off at the right Metro stop. We come up to the street. And we're in a really funky neighborhood. Looks like the Bowery before gentrification, way before.

We follow the directions. We're walking down these streets and it's getting worse.

We stop in front of a decrepit three story warehouse. This is the address. Esther checks it twice on the paper in the dim light. Paint peeling off the door. Garbage falling into the curb.

We look at each other. Should we bolt? This is gonna be embarrassing. Well, we made it here. We said we would come.

Esther knocks on the door. Paint flakes off with every rap.

Door opens. Dim light emanates from inside. It's our hostess. She's ecstatic to see us.

We walk in and find ourselves on a little bridge over a kind of moat. I look up. The upper three floors of the place have been removed. The moon is shining down through a skylight seventy five feet above my head.

The walkway leads to the entrance of a cavernous reception area, designed around a hooded fireplace big enough to roast Sea Biscuit, whole. A warm glow permeates the room, which is done in varying tones of dove grey blending into crème, edged with fuchsia.

A servant approaches to take our drink orders.

The lady is married to a French oil tycoon. "Better Home and Gardens" arrives tomorrow from NY to do a spread on "Contemporary French Interiors."

And then I remember something I learned when we toured Northern Italy, but forgot. In Europe, you never show what you have on the outside.

The Bouef Bourguignon was perfect, as was the Crème Caramel, Esther's favorite.

Paradigm Shift

What do you do when reality does a little Bunny Hop to the left?

Not everyone's reality, just yours. I mean, the sky don't turn purple and the grass don't turn pink. That would screw up everyone's reality. I'm just talking about a little seismic twitch that knocks your reality into the side pocket.

For example, in 1932, Charlie Chaplin entered a Charlie Chaplin look alike contest in Monte Carlo and came in third. Third. One minute, he and his friends are snickering up their sleeves, gonna have some fun with the locals. Next thing you know, he had been bounced out of the office in the universe that had 'Charlie Chaplin' painted on the door.

Comin' home from my gig at midnight. Turn the corner six blocks from my crib. Pass the house of a cat I know. My girlfriend's car is in his driveway.

Paradigm shift. The system you have constructed to help you channel chaos into form has just been thrown into a cocked hat. Your little portion of life's sidewalk just turned into sand.

Screech to a halt. Approach the car like it's a glowing UFO, like it's radioactive, and unfortunately, I don't seem be wearing the right Hazmat suit, one that would enable me to get close enough without getting fried.

I understand that it's a car. I understand that it doesn't just look like her car. It is her car. I'm trying to put this together. Right now, reality is a model plane kit and somebody left the propeller and one of the wheels outa the box.

I understand that all objects exist somewhere, taking up space, displacing cubic centimeters. But, surely, this can't be here.

The little stuffed dog on the console that has always been so cute is right there, it's pipe cleaner legs wrapped around the Go cup I gave her so she would stop spilling coffee on me in the passenger seat. But now, the little dog is horrible. Horrible.

Called her two hours ago.

"Getting' off the gig late, baby. I'll call you tomorrow. Sweet dreams."

She lives in Montclair. I live in Hoboken. . And here is her car, a fresh artifact of a brand new reality, parked in this guy's driveway in Hoboken at midnight.

Next, day, you wake up and begin to assemble a new paradigm, one that includes this information as a functioning component.

So, suck it up. Do the dance, Rob. Come on, don't be shy. You know it. You just played it on the gig last night.

“You do the Hokey Pokey and you turn yourself around.”

That's what it's all about.

Notes from an Enraged Muppet

Now, there's symphonic conducting and there's Broadway conducting.

There's a difference between conducting Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and conducting "Cats", especially since some genius realized you could fit more seats in a Broadway theatre if you took out the orchestra pit and stuck the orchestra in a room backstage.

The conductor is off somewhere, waving a stick at a video camera. The cast of "Cats" is onstage, looking at him on TV screens hung out in the audience.

Trying to get the "Cats" to gyrate together with the orchestra that's in front of you in your own little dark room, that's the gig.

Trust me, the cast doesn't think you're Toscanini. They think you're an enraged Muppet.

Years before I picked up a white stick with a cork handle, I sat on the other end of one, night after night, playing guitar in Broadway orchestras.

Saw good conductors and bad conductors. Didn't know it at the time, but I was compiling a subconscious mental file labeled: "Conducting Technique." Every conducting gesture I watched somehow went into the file: "That was clear.... That was unintelligible.... That was expressive.... That was stupid."

Best one I ever worked for; Paul Geminani, who came up out of the pit. He sort of evolved out of the percussion section in the early 70s, dropped the prehensile fin, began to walk upright, and started conducting all Sondheim's shows. Because he was a percussionist, his time was in the stone (his sense of rhythm and pulse was consistent and reliable).

Worst one. I won't say. But there was Peter Howard at "Barnum." A circus musical by Cy Coleman starring Jim Dale and a very young Glenn Close.

Top of Act II, every night, I'm in a purple circus band uniform with a banjo strapped around my neck off stage, ready to be carried on by two clowns and tossed downstage left, strumming the banjo furiously as Jim Dale belts out "Follow the Band."

One night, one of the clowns was a sub who was nervous. Tossed me so hard I skidded to a halt about two inches from the lip of the pit. What is the sound of an Italian and a banjo crashing onto concrete from ten feet up? Thankfully, that still remains a rhetorical question.

For the rest of the show, the orchestra was arrayed in a line behind a wooden fence upstage center, with Peter Howard conducting us in front.

Each night, near the end of Act II, the beautiful actress playing the diva Jenny Lind is hauled straight up in front of him into the rafters on a trapeze, singing her big number.

Peter had a tendency to hold the final note of her song out forever, while trying to get a glimpse up her dress as she ascended heavenward. The clarinet players would be holding that freaking note and turning purple while this guy got his jollies. Boy, did they hate that guy.

Then, there was the night at "Phantom of the Opera" when I was just beginning to study the conductor's score. I was squashed in the pit with the score on my lap just to the immediate left of the conductor's podium, and right next to this elderly lady violist from Queens. This chick had been playing the pits since the 40s. Seen it all. Reeked of Kents.

In Act II, I'm staring at the score when this dry, claw like hand punches me in my left shoulder: "Duck, kid."

I look up in time to see the conductor dive for the floor. And then, from the upper balcony out in the house, a crystal chandelier about fifteen feet in diameter comes sailing on a wire straight at the pit. It swoops about three feet over my head, then flies up to its fixed position high over the stage, upstage center.

Before I can catch my breath, the lady leans over: "Now, if can just find the other one, I'd have a hell of a pair of earrings."

We Must Find an Alternate Phrase

In the summer of '92, I attended a Symphonic Conducting workshop in Zlin, in the Czech Republic. Up until the recent revolt in that part of the world, the town was named Gotwaldof, after the Russian apparatchik who ran it. Then, they tore down his statue and the place reverted to its ancestral name.

It's built in concentric circles around a one hundred foot tall smokestack, which rises up out of an underground shoe factory like the tower of Mordor. Shift after shift of workers in overalls descend into the bowels of this place around the clock. Black smoke pours out of the stack fifty weeks out of the year. In the other two weeks, they shut the factory down to clean the smokestack and there's no hot water anywhere within twenty miles. Dig that.

The conducting workshop was great. You got to study with a variety teachers, which is useful, since conducting technique varies from region to region and you never know where you're going to wind up.

Actually, it's like chess. You can learn the rules in fifteen minutes, then spend the rest of your life trying to get it right.

What to do with the right hand? What to do with the left hand? Books and books are written. No one agrees.

In the first week, I studied with Tsung Yeh, who is from Peking. His father was a piano teacher at the University. In 1965, during the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guard broke his hands.

Tsung grew up spending most of his time in a secret closet his father built which was soundproof. Had a piano and phonograph. There were no scores, no written music allowed. Tsung learned to play the Beethoven Fifth Symphony on the piano by ear from listening to a recording of it a zillion times.

Every day at 5:30 AM, he went to the town square to study Tai Chi with the local Tai Chi master. Now, he incorporates the principles of Tai Chi into his conducting technique. He looks like he's flying. It's beautiful.

The next week, I study with Maestro Carel Strija from Poland. Completely different. No nonsense Germanic Dirigent technique. Yelled at us, constantly. "You must give a good auf takt (upbeat)!" So, you take a little from both and put your own technique together, eventually.

In 1994, I get a call to conduct a CD recording with a Polish orchestra for MMC Records out of Boston. One of the pieces on the disc will be mine. It's called "Celestial Navigation." If this goes, well, I'll be added to the label's roster of international conductors. It's a big break. If it goes well.

A month before I am scheduled to fly to Poland, I get a call from the owner of the label, William Thomas McKinley. He was producing the date. His wife wanted him to stay home. He had been having heart problems.

"OK. Got your ticket? Got your passport? We'll meet you at the hotel after you arrive."

"Yeah, Tom. I'm all set. Been working on the scores. I'm ready."

"Of course, you'll be directing the Silesian Philharmonic in either Polish or German. They don't speak English. How's your German?.....Rob?.....Rob!!"

Made a panic phone call to a conductor buddy, who steered me to Michael Braun (pronounced Me – ki—yale-- Brawn), the German language coach at the Metropolitan Opera. All he did, all day long, was prepare American opera directors and conductors to work in Europe. Just what the doctor ordered.

I arrive at his exquisite Murray Hill apartment. He is about seventy, with pale, aristocratic features and a wardrobe he could have inherited from George Sanders.

“Maestro, please, I have so little time. I have written out about twenty five phrases that I know I must use during the course of the sessions. Please translate them for me and help me with pronunciation.’

For some reason, all I could think of right then was a doll my sister had when we were growing up. You’d pull a plastic loop that was attached to a string that came out of the middle of her back and she would spout one of ten short phrases at random. That’s what I felt like. I was gonna be Chatty Cathy. Auf Deutsch.

He nods. He is used to this sort of last minute hysteria. He exudes a piquant Bavarian charm. He regards my list.

“Now, Rob. Here, for instance, you wish to say: ‘Will the trumpets please give me a sharp attack at measure 25.’ The German phrase for “sharp attack” is Attaca Uberforss. Unfortunely, though, Attaca Uberfoss is what the Nazis did to the Poles at the beginning of WWII and, as you will be conducting in Poland, I suggest we find..... an alternate phrase.”

“Dear God, Maestro!! Yes, by all means! We must find an alternate phrase! Don’t get me killed!!”

The phone rings. It’s an antique white one, like out of the thirties.

“Yah? Pronto?..... Vas?.....Vas? Dear. Dear! Please, you must to calm down. Tell me everything. Exactly everything and don’t leave anything out.”

Screaming at the other end was a young American woman who had just flown to Germany for her first big gig. Stage director for a new production of the Mozart opera Don Giovanni with the prestigious Manheim Stadt Oper.

From what I could glean, her first day of rehearsal had begun well. She remembered the phrases she’d learned from Maestro: “Please cross down left. Thank you.” “Please move back upstage right. Thank you.”

Then, as the rehearsal wore on, she noticed that the cast, which was comprised of first rate opera divas and stars, began to become more and more incensed with her. Finally, most of them walked out. No one would tell her what was wrong. She was in a flat out tailspin panic.

Maestro figured it out. She had started out doing exactly as he told her,

framing every phrase with “Bitte” (please) and “Danke” (thank you). But as the rehearsal became more heated, she was pushing to go faster and faster and somehow forgot to say please and thank you. She just started saying: “Now, go left. “ “Now, go up right.”

Unfortunately, in Germany, the only people you speak to without saying please and thank you are your servants. So, the Divas got pissed and left.

I swallowed hard. I would be getting on a plane in a month. What had I gotten myself into?”

My next worry was what conducting technique to use. As I said, it varies from region to region. It’s not a codified science. If you can find a way to conduct the orchestra using a system of gestures that they’re used to seeing, everything will go much smoother than if the players don’t understand what you are trying to show them with the baton. It’s tricky. So, I was concerned about this.

Welcome to Katowice. The city is ringed by fifty major coal producing installations. The air quality is like a crispy afternoon in hell. I tried to go for a job on the first day. It was like breathing through a sock.

McKinley and I meet in the lobby. We have a free day. First recording session doesn’t start until 6:00 PM. Go outside and meet our driver. He’s leaning on the white Mercedes, smoking.

“Good morning. Perhaps you could tell us, Sir, is there anything of interest to see in this area?”

He tosses the butt into the curb. Looks at his shoe.

“Auschwitz.”

McKinley and I look at each other. We were expecting to hear a list that included museums and, maybe, a zoo.

“Well, er, how far away is Auschwitz?”

Frowns at a spot on his brogues. Points to a small line of hills off to the West. At least I think they were hills. They, along with everything else, were shrouded in haze.

“Thirty kilometers. Twenty minutes drive.”

We arrive at a small suburb. Drive down a residential street. Turn into a side road and there it is. The huge wrought iron gate I’d seen in countless films,

topped by the inscription: "Arbeit mach Frie." Work Will Set You Free.

There was a light snow falling. We passed silently through the rooms, through the exhibits. Pile of eyeglasses held behind chicken wire, twenty feet wide, reaching up to the ceiling. Pile of shoes. Pile of suitcases.

I looked at Tom. He was crying and his color was bad. I got him out of there.

To leave, you have to pass through a snack bar. A snack bar.

We reach the driver, who had assumed his laconic pose, holding up the side of the Merc. He tosses away his butt.

"There has been an earthquake in Los Angeles. 6.5 Richter in magnitude."

It was January 17, 1994. I thought of my friends in LA. I thought about what I had just seen. I thought about the fact that I was about to address a Polish orchestra in German, twenty miles away from this place. Attaca Uberforss!! I was still worried about conducting technique. At that moment, there was nothing in my world that was not shaken up.

I enter the vast concert hall of the Silesian Philharmonic and I stop dead in my tracks. There, in the foyer, beneath a lit chandelier, is a huge oil painting of their Music Director, Maestro Carel Strija.

My God! I studied with him in Zlin. I know his technique. "You must give a good Auf takt!!" That's it. Open Sesame!

He was in a formal pose in white tie and tails with a scarlet sash draped across his chest from the right shoulder to his left waist. On the sash was a medallion. The Order of the Knights of Malta. Looked exactly like Bela Lugosi in Dracula.

I begin my first rehearsal. I deliver my introductory speech:

"Guttten Tag, Meine Damen und Meine Herren. Meine nam is Robert Tomaro. Ich bin gluchlich hier zu sein, und mit ihnen zu musizieren....."

I memorized it so thoroughly that, even today, you could wake me up at four in the morning and I could recite it verbatim.

The orchestra was wonderful. Very patient with the difficult bits. It was gonna be OK. I was gonna do it.

The session ends at 10:00 PM and Tom is hungry. Wants Chinese food. Only Tom could suss out the whereabouts of a Chinese restaurant in Katowice, still serving at midnight. Takes us a half hour to get there.

The owner waits on us. He is half Chinese and half Irish and he's drunk. His accent is split down the middle. Can't describe it. Sounded like he was gonna hurt himself when he pronounced the phrase: "Spare Rib Combo plate."

Tom wants egg rolls.

"No egg rolls."

"How can you not have egg rolls? It's a Chinese Restaurant."

Owner sighs. Warily delivers a speech that he most probably mouths about five times a day.

"Air too bad to grow soy beans. Need soy beans for egg rolls."

Soy beans will grow on a fire escape in NYC if you throw a seed into a hand full of dirt. They'll probably grow on the moon. But not here. Yikes. I got to breath this stuff for the next couple of days. Shoulda taken up smoking when I had the chance. What the hell?

Got back to the hotel at one AM, I so tired I could barely focus my eyes. I stop at the bar off the lobby for a quick one. A woman sits down next to me. She is heavily made up. Her hair is spun high atop her head and a portion of it is canted forward in a frozen wave, like a science exhibit that could be entitled: "Inside a Tsunami."

"Hello." (Hah - loo) She gives me the once over. Her eyebrows go up.

"I can see you are... quality man." (Qval - ee - tay - Mahn).

Flashes a sideways grin. One tooth has gone AWOL. Leans closer and continues, in a raspy whisper that is meant to be conspiratorial:

"I am.....sex engineer."

I finish the last sip of my vodka, stand up, and say: "How lovely for you, dear. Where did you do your graduate work?"

The last I saw of her, her head was cocked to one side as she watched me head for the elevator. Perhaps I was rude. Perhaps it was all getting to me. It had been a long day.

Or, perhaps I should have found an alternate phrase.

Here's Lucy

Winter, 1986. Got the call to repeat the role of Stanley, the singing, acting, guitar playing furniture mover, in yet another regional production of "I Love My Wife", a Cy Coleman musical.

Coconut Grove Playhouse in Florida. Six weeks outa NYC in the dead of winter. Thank you, Thespus.

My character was the friend of the lead, played, in this production, by Desi Arnaz, Jr., who was a great guy, if a little wired. He'd just gotten out of rehab and this was his first gig back in the limelight.

His wife was played by Sandra Santiago, who was on "Miami Vice" at the time, which was cock of the walk in South Beach in 1986. The producer would call up the mayor and ask him to close down three blocks of Collins Ave at four PM on a Friday. Sure, no problem, anything for the show that turned a shabby former resort town into a pink and turquoise play land of the rich.

Desi and I were watching a night shoot of "Vice". Don Johnson just jumped off a battleship chain and rolled to the right, come up gun in hand, for about the twelfth time.

Desi lays this on me:

“So, Rob you want to know what it was like being Lucy’s kid?”

What do you say? No, why would I want to glean such arcane knowledge? What could I possibly do with it? Answer: this.

Here’s what he told me:

Mother’s day, 1966. He was 16, and had just come off the rode with his rock band “Dino, Desi, and Billy”, which consisted of Desi, Dean Martin’s son, and the son of both of their families accountants, Billy (Ah, show biz).

Flushed with success, the world was his oyster. He woke early, wrote a note to his mom saying he would be spending the day and having dinner at the Martin ranch in Twelve Oaks. Then, he split.

It’s around seven thirty that night. The two juniors come out onto the front porch in Twelve Oaks to watch the sun set beyond the mountains in Ojai. There, at a vanishing point between two long rows of poplars, appears a cloud of dust at the entrance to the service road to the ranch. It gets closer and closer.

A huge rider panel truck rolls into the circular drive and stops in front of them. Guy with a clipboard hops out:

“Either a you guys Desi Arnaz, Jr.?”

A bewildered Desi raises his hand like he’s just been busted for cheating on a test in high school.

“Please sign here”

Takes Desi around to the back of the truck, swings the doors open.

There, in a huge pile in the back of the truck, was everything he owned: his bed and furniture, his clothes and books, his drums, everything.

Badly shaken, he clamored up this mountain of stuff to retrieve a note which was pinned to the top like a flag on Everest:

“Happy mother’s day. Love, Mom.”

In the balmy Miami night, Don Johnson was still working on jumping off the chain. Desi turns to me:

“And that’s what it was like, Rob,....”

(I guess my mouth sort of dropped open).

“A veritable laff riot.”

Country and Western Night in Bucharest

Summer of ‘96. I am booked to conduct three concerts with the Black Sea Philharmonic in Constanta, Rumania, a working class resort town in the South. Then, I fly up to Bucharest, , to the country’s only International airport, then to London, one day off, then conduct a CD of my works with the London Symphony Orchestra, at EMI Abbey Road studios, no less, where the Beatles did all their stuff. Dig me.

I finish the concerts and hop a cab to the Constanta airport, which has weeds growing in the cracks of the runway, guards with AK’s in twin towers which look down on a dog who hasn’t moved off the tarmac in the two hours I been there.

Got there three hours before my flight, because it’s Eastern Europe, you dig. I’m in the transit lounge waiting for the ticket kiosk to open up so I can see if I can get a window seat.

Two huge army guys with machine guns walk over and say I’m wanted by their Captain in the back room. Nice.

They escort me back and I sit down with the, I swear, movie interrogation light shining in my face and this Peter Lorre looking Captain staring a hole through me with those eyes right outa “M”.

No preamble: "How much currency money have you got with you?"

Charming. This is where I get jacked for all my dough.

I tell him and he makes a note on a yellow pad. Asks me what I'm doing in Constanta. I explain to him in an elaborate mime show and broken German that I'm an orchestra conductor, etc.

He's not buying it and/or my German is so bad he doesn't get it.

I extend both palms and roll up my sleeves like David Copperfield, to show him I am not going for my piece. Then, I reach into my bag and pull out my monogrammed walnut stick case. From this, I slowly extract a white, fiber glass wand with cork handle. I wave it around and hum Beethoven. "Dirigent. Ich bin eine Americanish orchester Dirigent."

The light bulb goes off; "Ahh, dirigintska. Dirigintska. " He stamps my passport. We're all pals, now.

Then, he gives me the word. Turns out I needn't have come out to the airport three hours before my 5:00 departure for Bucharest because my plane left a half hour before I got there. Someone changed the schedule.

It gets better. There is not another flight scheduled to depart for Bucharest in the next 24 hours.

That's it. No Bucharest, no flight to London, no London Symphony for our hero.

Half hour later I am sitting on the floor in the corner, jaw slack, out of options.

A cute flight attendant, for God knows what reason, walks over and asks me the Rumanian equivalent of: "Why the long face, chum?"

I whip out my palsied, school boy German, once again and regale her with my tale of woe.

But see, she's this determined type and I'm the challenge of the day. I've seen that look in the eyes of several ex girlfriends. It is not to be discounted.

She yanks me up, grabs my passport, and shunts me onto a baggage cart. Puts the thing in gear and bolts for the runway. Balanced atop some luggage like a pet Chow, I learn from her, as she yells back at me through the wind, that the only plane coming in tonight is an international flight from Helsinki

that is making an unusual stop here to let off one VIP passenger, then on to Bucharest.

It lands. She brings the cart to a halt. Ground crew rolls a staircase up to the door. She is bounding up the stairs and makes it to the top just as the door swings open. She accosts the male purser. She's waving my passport. He's shaking his head. She's yelling and gesticulating down at me. In order to appear more pathetic and needy, I slump to one side atop my luggagy perch.

Finally, she wears the guy down. He gives a terse nod. I know my cue when I see it. I leap up the stairs and into the plane in seconds. Didn't even have a chance to thank my Rumanian Guardian Angel.

It's an old Aeroflot crate decommissioned by the Russian air force sometime during the cold war.

As my heartbeat calms down, I notice I'm sitting across the aisle from a huge lady. Got to be three hundred pounds. She gives me this look like what am I doing on her plane? She knows I ain't kosher.

I am about to offer her some kind of explanation when the thing shudders to life and begins to rumble down the runway, which must be much too short for this plane, 'cause the pilot has the hammer down and the ancient engines are pissed off.

He gooses it off the ground with a lurch and we all are jerked forward in our seats. Unfortunately, the big lady across from me is occupying a seat that doesn't seem to be bolted to the floor. She is launched unceremoniously up and into the row in front of her; like a cow carcass out of a Roman catapult. It's extremely unsettling. Nobody says anything.

What do you do, after that? I mean, how do you call the flight attendant and say: "I'd like a bag of peanuts and a ginger ale, and when do we see the little dog jump through a flaming hoop? Or does the fat lady do that again in a half an hour?" It's horrible . horrible. Disquieting. Throws you right off your game, man. Makes you question fundamental aspects of reality. Fat ladies hurling unexpectedly through the air after you've been stranded on a baggage cart, that will put you right off your borscht, my friend. Trust me.

But the real fun is yet to come, campers. Here is our hero, disembarking from an international Finnish flight with an American passport stamped inbound from the States at the domestic terminal three days ago. I am at the wrong terminal I have the wrong papers. None of my shit works. The custom guys don't know what to do. I turn on the pathetic act, again. What the heck, it's

been working all day. Does the trick. I'm out there.

Nerves are shot. Shot. Taxi to the Nonvoter. Vodka. Vodka. The great equalizer.

I'm staring ahead in the lounge at a sight that's so bizarre, the image is filtering into my retinue but I have no context in which to register it, so it looks like a visual non sequitur.

Apparently, It's Country and Western night at the Nonvoter. There is a band of Rumanian guys with accordions and cimbalom and drums and one electric guitar. They're in polyester cowboy outfits, chaps, and plastic Stetsons, playing "Okay from Muskogee", "Goodnight, Irene." And "Why don't you love me like you used to do?" After each number, they take toy six shooters out of their holsters, fire off several rounds of caps and yell: "Hooweee!"

That's it. That's all. I bolt for the room. I sleep for two hours, then wake up. I have a date that night.

Some embassy guy from Constanta set me up on a blind date with a Rumanian girl from the Bucharest American Embassy. We go to a jazz club. It was fun. Then, we go back to her place .

(No you don't. I got to keep some stuff to myself. You're so nasty, anyway)

Next day, I made my plane. I made it to Abbey Road. I crossed the Zebra cross walk. I conducted the London Symphony in EMI Studio 1, where the Beatles recorded Sergeant Pepper and All You Need is Love.

Life just gets differenter and differenter.

Frozianus Popsiculus Conductorus

Two days after my harrowing escape from Rumania, I am standing on the podium at Abby Road recording studio in London. I got there two hours early so I could bask in the vibes. John Lennon was here. He practically lived here.

Arrayed before me is The London Symphony Orchestra. We are recording a piece of mine, "The Bridge of Souls" It will be on MMC Recordings CD number 2085, along with Aaron Copland's Symphony No. 3, which I will conduct with a Czech orchestra at a later time.

We have just finished the final take. The musicians begins shuffling their feet. They not bored or nervous. It's what they do instead of clapping when they like something. They can't clap. They're holding instruments.

They wouldn't shuffle if they didn't feel like it. Means they like the piece. Dig that.

In the States at that time, I was conducting a Community College orchestra in Jersey. To switch suddenly from conducting that orchestra to conducting the London Symphony is like arriving at your parking spot to find that a fairy has replaced your Gremlin with a Masserati.

It takes a some getting used to. You don't have to stomp on the pedal to get the thing to go. You just tickle it and it roars out of the box at 65 mph.

With the community orchestra, if you want to get the strings to make diminuendo to pianissimo (a gradual reduction in volume from loud to soft), you extend your left arm into the air beside you and push down forcefully, like you're trying to close an overstuffed suitcase.

With the LSO, I found that if I glanced at the first violin section and raised an eyebrow, they would immediately produce an exquisite, velvety breath of sound. It was like being dropped into a garden at the hush of twilight. No pedal stomping necessary.

The LSO is the autonomous orchestra of London. They book their own engagements, and they book themselves around the clock.

I arrived on a Sunday afternoon. I saw in the paper they were performing that night, Berlioz's "The Damnation of Faust Oratorio", conducted by Kent Nagano. I went. Might as well check out my band.

It was at least three hours long. The next day, my session began at 10:00 AM. They showed no signs of fatigue. After my session. they were scheduled to play a film scoring date until 10:00 PM. And on and on.

It's July. The trombone player looks at his day planner and says: "Oh, look, we have a day off in September." Chops of steel, these cats.

I emerge from the recording room and duck into the control booth to hear the playback. A woman comes up to me. She's the conductor of the next session, Madeleine Shatz, Music Director of the Fairbanks Symphony in Alaska. She says:

"That was beautiful. I'd like to commission you to write something for my orchestra. Any ideas of what that could be?"

"Well, that was "The Bridge of Souls, part One". I've envisioned it as a work in three parts. How about if I write "Bridge, Part Two" for you."

"Done."

Fast forward to March of 1998. I go to Fairbanks to conduct the premiere of the new piece.

I've been asked to give a lecture to a class at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. "The Process of Symphonic Music Composition" Have no idea what I'm going to say. My process is, basically, I go into a little trance and come out of it a few hours later and the page is black with notes. That's what happens. Ask any composer.

I am on the stage of an auditorium in front of two hundred college kids. At the podium, the Dean leans into a mic and is reading my vita by way of introduction.

I lean over to the cat next to me, the chair of the Music Department:

"What should I talk about?"

He leans over to me.

"These kids are the descendents of 1849 Wildcat gold miners. They regard anyone from the lower forty eight with suspicion. They can smell bullshit a mile away. Just tell 'em the truth and you'll be alright."

Back in Jersey, a lecture on music composition would be met with a few, terse, banal questions from most college audiences.

Not here, though. I answered questions for forty five minutes:

"When you compose, are you thinking more technically or more

emotionally?”

“Do you find your inspiration comes from memories associated with your life, or from pure imagination not connected with past experience?”

The premiere goes very well. As I am driven back to my hotel, the lady says: “As it is your last day here tomorrow, the orchestra has arranged a little surprise. Be ready to be picked up at 8:00 AM. Dress warmly.”

Good plan. It’s forty degrees below. When you walk out of doors, you hear two clicks. It’s the mucus in your nostrils freezing into little green ice cubes.

Next morning, the car is going deep into the woods. Comes around a bend to a little house. Guy says hi. He is Inuit. We’re going on an outing. Gives me a huge orange snow suit to put on. I look like a big Creamsicle.

We go out back. There are thirty five dog houses. Each one has a husky standing in front of it, chained to a spike in the ground.

When they see this guy, they go crazy. The barking and jumping up and down is deafening. One dog goes so nuts, he actually finds a way to jump up on top of the kennel, chain and all. Keeps barking and jumping.

What’s happening is; the guy is choosing a team of ten huskies to pull a dog sled. The dogs know that only one third of them will be chosen. It doesn’t take the Dog Whisperer to tell you they are saying: “Hey! Hey! Hey! Me! Me! Me!”

As each dog is chosen, the others know their chances have just been mathematically reduced, and they freak out even more.

Each chosen dog walks to the harness preening and shaking his ass in disdain at the dogs who’ve been left behind.

Bundled in my snow suit, I waddle like the Michelin Man to the dog sled. My guide tucks me in. Puts a big blanket around me. My head is propped up on pillows. My disposable camera is at the ready. We are going to go twelve miles down the frozen Cheena river.

The guy stands on the runners, takes the reins. The barking has reached an hysterical crescendo.

Just behind my ear, I hear him say; “Hut”

The team leaps forward at a sprint. The barking stops like someone turned off a TV. The sled shoots ahead at a hot clip. We’re scooting under

overhanging foliage crusted with ice which reflects the muted morning sunlight.

We burst out of the brush onto the river, which is about seventy five yards wide from bank to bank. The silence. There is a quality to this silence, broken only by the blades on the ice, that is exquisite. The sound of the world has been swallowed up somewhere behind us.

Another sled appears down river, headed towards us. My guy begins slowing down. So does the other guy. When they pull to within twenty yards of each other, they stop. The other guy calls out to us in Inuit. My guy answers. They sound angry. They keep yelling, getting angrier and angrier.

Then, the two teams of dogs pick up the vibe from their masters and begin howling at each other, lips pulled back to reveal teeth inherited from their wolfen ancestry.

The guttural clicking of the Inuit language is not lovely even when spoken in a civil tone. As these guys scream at each other, I can feel the spittle from my guy's mouth spritz the top of my head. It is not pleasant.

The other guy flips up the corner of a blanket in front of him and gropes around under it. Something tells me he is not reaching for a bag of wampum to trade for beaver pelts.

My guy responds by producing a sawed off shotgun and placing it on the rail in front of him, where he has tied off the reins.

Lovely. I've heard about these things. . . Some ancient internecine blood feud. These two bang away at each other and it's the hapless shlub in the blanket who gets it in the neck.

They'll forget about me as soon as my body slips beneath the waves of the Cheena. I am discovered in five thousand years, preserved in a block of ice, my camera held up protectively in front of my face.

Perfect specimen of a vanished breed:

"Hmm...Frozianus Popsiculus Conductorus. Look, you can count his teeth."

Whatever it was they were pissed about, they decided to give it a rest.

"Hut". We go hurtling back the way we came. My guy mutters under his breath the whole way.

I heard Jack London left the Klondike and wound up drinking himself to

death in LA. Can't blame him.

Miss Minelli Has Left the Building

Met my friend Kenny for a drink after work. Work for him is acting and singing in "Victor Victoria" at the Marriott Marquis. Work for me is slaving over a hot guitar in the pit at Evita.

He's at the bar at Barrymore's. He don't look right. All pasty. Then, I remember. Tonight was opening night with Liza on his show.

"Alright, take a deep breath and tell Papa all."

He just shakes his head. I settle in. This is gonna be good.

Julie Andrews, who is repeating her movie role as the gender ambiguous star of *Victor Victoria*, announced recently she was taking her two week vacation to go skiing in Switzerland. Took about minutes for the backstage rumor mill to suss out the real dope. She was going to Switzerland, alright, but for a throat operation, so who knew if she would return to the show. The whole cast was nervous about their future paychecks if she leaves.

So, they call in Liza Minelli to replace her for two weeks.

Tony Roberts is Julie's co star, doing the Robert Preston role. Tony is a consummate pro, and also the most anal cat to come down the pike.

For example, there was a pack of cigarettes that was supposed to be set on a diagonal on a coffee table far stage left. Tony was downstage right, speaking to the audience. The actor at the coffee table moved the pack so he could put his elbow on the table, Tony caught this out of the corner of his eye.

Without stopping his monologue, Tony crosses over to the table, re- sets the pack, and returns to his original position. Never took his eyes off the audience. You see what I mean.

So, the last thing he needs in his well ordered universe was Liza. She came into her first rehearsal and discarded the blocking, forgot many of her lines, and generally turned "*Victor Victoria*" into "*Liza with a Z*" plus some extra people standing around onstage.

Tony bugged and split. Kenny, his understudy, got the call.

It's opening night. Whole two week run is sold out. Liza returns to the great White Way!!

Kenny arrives at Tony's dressing room an hour before curtain. He's putting on his makeup when the PSM (Production Stage Manager) comes over the intercom with the ritualistic countdown: "Half hour, please, your call is half hour. Thank you." Now this is a half hour before the show is supposed to start, but it's a half hour in theatre time, which is pretty flexible.

"Fifteen minutes, please. Your call is fifteen."

Two minutes later; "Holding at ten. Ten minutes please. (then this ominous bit, delivered completely deadpan, comes over the speaker:)

Miss Minelli has left the building. Holding at ten. Thank you.”

She just flipped. Grabbed a leather jacket and a pack of Marlboros and was wandering around Times Square. Welcome to planet diva, where the weather is always crazy.

“Call is five minutes. Five minutes please.”

Means she’s back and the clock is running.

At around two minutes before “Places. Your call is places, please,” Kenny walks across the hall to Julie’s dressing room, now occupied by Liza, to poke his head in and say Break a leg.

There’s a huge African American bodyguard named Omar standing in front of the door.

“Hi Omar. I’d like to see Miss Minelli please.”

Omar knows his job.

“In reference to what?”

“Well, Liza and I are about to do a play out there, and I wanted see if she’s ok.

“Please wait here.”

Ducks in. Comes back out.

“Miss Minelli will see you, now.”

Kenny walks in. The dressing room is shrouded in murky darkness. Light issues from two candelabra on a piano. Through the gloom, he sees the walls are covered with pictures of Judy Garland.

In the center of the room, a masseuse is huddled over a prostrate figure swathed in white towels on a table. Tony approaches.

He leans over the top of the table. He extends a hand down.

It comes to life. She grips his arms with hands like claws. Her eyes are wild with terror.

“You’ve got to get me through this!! You’ve got to help me out there! You’ve got to help me!!”

“Jeez, Liza, calm down. You’re gonna be fine. It’s gonna be great.”

He makes these kind of cooing noises until the grip loosens. He extricates himself and splits. Christ!

Liza makes her first entrance like she’s shot out of a cannon. All over the stage, making stuff up, changing stuff around. The actors are scrambling in a crazy attempt to spontaneously re-write the show and re-invent their blocking.

But it’s all perfect. Liza’s back on Broadway. She can do no wrong. She could come out and read Chinese menus all night and her fans would dissolve in paroxysms of bliss. That’s the way it is. That’s the star thing. Don’t try to figure it out.

Back at the bar, Kenny is finishing his second drink. Color is returning to his face.

“Kenny, I know you can survive the next two weeks, brother, with the serenity and fortitude that is afforded us by our Higher Power and vodka and zanex.”

He gave me weak smile, but at least he was tryin’ to get his punch back”

Fiber, Ken. My dad would say this builds fiber, you know, character.”

He shook his head.

“Rob, every time I close my eyes, the only thing I can see is this: I was onstage in Act I, tonight. Liza just made her first exit. I’m singing that dumb song about Paris at night and something catches my eye. It’s Liza. She’s sitting in a chair, just offstage left, looking straight at me with those eyes, man, those eyes.

She has a towel around her neck, an oxygen mask in her left hand, and a Marlboro in her right hand. She is alternately puffing on the Marlboro and sucking oxygen out of the mask, back and forth, back and forth.

I expected to see her go up like a freaking Roman candle any second.

Freaking Liza with a C, man! C for conflagration!”

Second Best

What about the cats who don't catch the golden ring as the painted ponies of Rock and Roll whirl round and round? What about the cats who almost get there?

Pete Best was the original drummer for the Beatles. He was the one the girls would swoon over, ignoring John and Paul. Dig that.

His mom drove them to gigs in her van. He struggled through years of no money gigs entertaining drunken businessmen in the Reperbahn in Hamburg. Nine hour gigs, fueled by bennies and beer.

But he was out of step. Didn't get Lennon's humor. Staunchly refused to trade in his slicked back hair for the Beatle do. Not Fab Four material. You wouldn't catch him frolicking in the field in "Hard Day's Night".

Gets right up to the altar of the Rock and Roll temple, the audition with George Martin at EMI's Abbey Road studios. Word comes down: you got the deal, but lose the drummer. Ringo is hired on one week notice. Best gets the boot, and it wasn't a Beatle Boot.

So, what do you do, construct a Rube Goldberg machine with a lever, a rope and a shoe that you yank on to kick yourself in the ass first thing in the morning for the rest of your life? I don't know.

In Chicago in the seventies, I used Dennis Johnson on bass and Gary Smith on drums in my own group when they weren't working with "Jim Petereck and Chi – Rhythm". Jimmy had a hit in the sixties with his band the Ides of March, tune called "Vehicle". Been bangin' on the doors of the Rock and Roll Temple ever since.

The Scotti Brothers, LA producers, come to town, take one look at 'em and tell 'em they all have to lose fifteen pounds. Dig that. We can't all look like Mick and Keith, man. It's Chicago. You need a layer of insulation to get through the winter, like a polar bear.

They do demos, photo shoots, promo stuff, on and on. Time is running out, money is running out. Sign the deal, already. Goes on for six months. They're all broke. Dennis and Gary finally have enough and quit.

Two minutes later, Jimmy Petereck writes "Eye of the Tiger" which gets picked up for the Rocky movie. Changes the band's name to "Survivor". Thirty years later, they're still doing the summer festival circuit. Where's Dennis and Gary? Who knows?

Easy to say: "If they'd only stuck it out for a little while longer." But the trenches of rock and roll are lined with souls who starve and bleed waiting for the brass ring to come their way. No one has a crystal ball.

No coincidence Jimmy named the revamped lineup "Survivor". The survivors get the chicks and the limos. The others get TV dinners and watch their pals on Saturday Night Live with an ass kicking boot machine in the corner of their crappy little apartment.

Another Pete, drummer Peter Minucci, auditions for Billy Idol's band at S.I.R. in NY. First thing, Idol jumps up onto the drum riser and spits water in his face.

"What the hell are you doing!!?"

(Cockney accent, lip sneer and all:)

"I always do that to my drummers"

Pete's Italian and from Staten Island. Forget about it. He's up off the drum throne and in his face:

“Limy son of a bitch, you think this is Europe? It's America. I been spit on in Europe but we're in America, now. Try that again and I'll gauge your eyes out with my drum stick.”

His buddy got the gig. Made \$350,000 over three years with Billy the Spritzer. What are you gonna do.? Ride the painted pony. Let the spinning wheel spin.

Beauregard's Statue in the Moonlight

By '97, I had reached the nadir of my career. Out of graduate school since '94, I had applied for about two hundred conducting positions and come up empty, so I accepted an offer of a straight job. Yikes.

I was working as a Festival Director for a Music Festival Company, one of many outfits that organizes trips for high school bands, orchestras and choruses to a whole array of cities and cruise ships. You book the air, the hotel, the restaurants, the "attractions" (sight seeing, etc.), organize the competition, hire the judges for the competition and, on the last day, hand out trophies and medals to the lucky winners.

Two in the morning before the final festival day, the hapless Festival director can be found in his/her hotel room sprawled out on the comforter, attaching shiny plastic figurines of some winged Diana to the tops of countless trophies. This tedious ritual is known in the business as: Screwing the lady in the bed.

Then, you sit there and sweat. You're in charge of festivals occurring in as many as five cities on the same weekend and you're in the city where the most stuff is likely to go awry.

All the contracts and all the arrangements for dozens of school groups are logged in huge white binders with the festival city name on them. So, there I am with all the books lined up like tombstones in the light of the streetlamp outside the hotel, Boston, San Francisco, Minneapolis, just waiting for the phone to ring with another catastrophic phone call from somewhere I'm not.

Tonight, it was an infuriated chaperone parent screaming at me from a

pay phone in Nassau. “The ship just sailed without us. We’re standing on the quay. Our luggage is onboard. Hear that sound in the background, you jerk? That’s a hundred and fifty teenage girls crying their hearts out. What are you going to do about it?!!!”

You do a spin tap dance, is what you do. Promise ‘em a free trip next year, free everything. It actually works some of the time.

Flew down to New Orleans to run the festival at the Orpheum Theater. Never been down there before. Got in a day early. Dropped my bag at the hotel, which was way out in Metairie, hopped in a cab and said something I’d been wanting to say for years: “Take me to Bourbon Street.”

Walking up Bourbon Street, I was struck by the high level of music pouring out of every joint; Dixieland, Blues, Be Bop, Rock, whatever was being played, it was being played right.

Walk past this one joint and stopped in my tracks like I had been hit with a two by four. Coming through the walls onto the street was the sound of an electric blues guitar player who sounded frighteningly like Stevie Ray Vaughn or some other incredible genius. Whoever this monster was, I had to check him out.

I go in. It’s practically empty. Sit at table with a beer and the guy is onstage with his band, absolutely smokin’. Damn.

He finishes his set and I walk up to the stage:

“Man, I have no idea who you are, but let me buy you a beer, ‘cause you’re a motherfucker.”

As musicians go, this sort of opening gambit required no further elaboration. He sits down and we’re fast friends in, like, two minutes. It’s weird. Among musicians, especially guitar players, there is a shared history that’s embedded in the grooves of your DNA. Cats know cats, and cats know enough to stay away from squares.

When he found out it was my first night in town, he flipped out. Had to show me everything. It would be rude not to, an egregious breach of Southern hospitality.

It’s midnight. We get into his red pickup. First thing, absolutely the inviolable first thing, he insists that we begin by paying homage to Gen. Beauregard, hero of the Confederacy.

Ten minutes later, we’re standing in front of Beauregard’s statue in the

moonlight at his tomb in the St. Louis cemetery. His horse's statue has one leg up in the air. There's a whole code to this that has to do with bravery. If the horse has two feet in the air, the guy in the statue was brave, three feet up, really brave. If the horse has all four feet on the ground, he was a bloody coward but got his own statue somehow, anyway. Go figure.

Then, it's off to some tiny place way off the beaten path for "the real" rice and beans. Then all the way back the other way to catch the late set of a killing' zydeco band.

My friend's name was Billy Gregory, and he had the distinction of being one of very few white guys who had penetrated the inner circle of the zydeco sanctum sanctorum. There's a whole hierarchy. There's a zydeco king, who wears a crown while he plays. Currently, the king is Rocking Dobsy Junior, who inherited the mantle of office from his father, Rocking' Dobsy Senior, upon his demise.

Billy has a million stories, some of them light and crispy, some of them darker than a body dumped in the bayou at midnight. I loved 'em all. My job was just to keep the drinks comin':

"I had been trying to get a night offa playin' for months, 'cause there was this chick I wanted to take out to dinner, see? So, I finally get a night off and I take her to the best joint I can afford.

We're at the table. I got the champagne out. I'm tryin' to turn on the charm, you know? But, my night off was not to be, man.

You see, Professor Longhair was on the stand with his band that night and his guitar player had showed up drunk and gotten canned (Professor Longhair was an elegant and regal piano player who practically invented a whole genre of New Orleans music in the '50s).

And now, it's too late. Longhair sees me at the table. He moves up to the mic: "Billees Gregorees!! Will Billees Gregorees report to the bandstand immediately, please?"

(Longhair apparently thought it added an element of formality and class to pluralize peoples names. Did it all the time.)

"So, I jumped up and played. You couldn't disappoint the Prof."

By the end of the night, he was telling me some stories that give me the willies to this day. Like this one:

We're riding along in the pickup truck out to Metairie to drop me off, and

he removes an ancient looking, yellowed, wilted business card from his wallet.

“I inherited this from my old man. It was his most precious possession.”

On the front was some smeared printing that I could just make out as:

“Wilber T. Hearn, Sheriff. New Orleans, Louisiana”

On the back was written, in very careful penmanship:

“Please extend to the bearer of this card every courtesy to which he may be entitled. Thank you. Sheriff Wilber T. Hearn.”

Then Billy goes on:

“My dad worked the docks in the forties. One Friday night, he’d just collected his pay envelope when a couple of guys jumped him in an alley. Beat him up pretty good and took his dough.

Dad showed up at the police station the next day, walked up to the desk sergeant, told him what went down, showed him this card and said: “I’ll be takin’ care of this.”

Sargeant barely nods. Dad leaves.

Next night, Dad finds ‘em, shoots em. Got most of his dough back. End of story. Didn’t even make the papers.”

Whoa, I thought. Heck with 007. This guy actually has a license to kill. Keeps it in his wallet. I made a mental note not to piss him off between there and my hotel.

Hard to describe the vibe in that town if you haven’t been there. There it was, ten years before Katrina, and you could feel the manic, dancing on the edge of the volcano energy.

This place has drive through daiquiri stands. But, to discourage drunk driving, they absolutely would not give you a straw! Safety first!

Louisiana license plate says: “Sportsman’s Paradise.” Maybe they should consider changing that to everyone’s favorite Mardi Gras greeting: “Show us your tits!”

The vibe was unique and pervasive. All that voodoo, all those ghosts. Keep those young boys out tap dancin’ on Bourbon, faster and faster and maybe it will call up enough gris gris to keep the bad shit from comin down. Well, it

worked for two hundred years.

Never saw Billees Gregorees again, but if we run into each other, I hope it's on my stomping ground. I owe him a grand tour, and every courtesy to which he may be entitled.

The Ascension of the Archangel Rafael

I live alone. The TV is always on. Its pixilated glow bathes the walls of my room in virtual light, providing no warmth. It offers, instead, a faux companionship.

The murmur of voices, muted beneath the level of cognition, are my babbling brook, my waterfall in the Amazon basin.

The History Channel, mostly. Has a big, quasi Anglican “H” for a logo. They should tell the truth, the History Channel people. They should just come out and say the H stands for Hitler. ‘Cause most of the shows are about Hitler. He’s the star of the History Channel.

History is comforting. You can depend on it. It always turns out the same. History won’t knock on your door at two in the morning and throw your ring in your face.

The Battle of Midway always turns out the same. We always sink the four Japanese flat tops. The Battle of Stalingrad always turns out the same. General Paulus always surrenders. Dependable.

I’ve noticed that there are three topics on TV that always get my attention, a kind of creepy Trinity of Obsession.

I cannot turn away from: anything UFO, anything ghost, or anything Hitler. If they ever produce a show entitled: “Hitler’s Ghost Abducted Me in a UFO”, I would be paralyzed. I would be unable to stop watching it.

A few years ago, a friend called from LA. He was breathless:

“Turn on the TV, Rob. Turn on A &E. “

“What...”

“No questions. Do it. Just do it!!!”

This story is about what was on, that day.

But, let’s go back. Let’s go back to when I met Rafael Rudd. He grew up near me in Jersey but I met him at a spiritual retreat in Myrtle Beach.

His parents recognized early on that he was a gifted musician. Great pianist. Graduated from Juilliard. But, an even better Harpist.

Ever try playing the harp? For such an angelically beautiful instrument, it is brutally unforgiving unless you have a very specific gift.

It must be approached like you're trying to feed a unicorn in the forest, and it will elude all but those who have been chosen to brush its strings in the right way.

He was amazing. I don't think he even practiced it.

In 1981, I composed a score for a film called "The Paper Boy". The opening number (called the Main Title sequence) was written for orchestra with harp obbligato, that is, a very intricate harp solo that threaded its way through the piece like water, like my imaginary Amazon waterfall.

Rafael was the only harpist I knew. I hired him to come into Giant Recording Studios in NY to play his part as an overdub, that is, the orchestra had already done their bit. I'd saved the harp part for a separate session, 'cause I knew it was gonna be challenging.

I mailed him the music. It ran to about fifteen pages. Huge.

I see him pull up on 8th Avenue in his parents' 1976 Bonneville Station wagon. Thing was twenty feet long. Oozed around the corner from 32nd.

Moored it in front of the building like he was docking the Queen Mary. Me and the recording engineer were watching from the third floor studio window.

He extracted the massive harp from the car. Big as King Tut's sarcophagus. Plops it on a dolly, heads for the elevator.

When he's finally installed in the studio, I ask the tech guy to bring him a music stand. Rafe (that what he preferred) said don't bother. He doesn't need one. I asked him what did he mean? There was a ton of music. He said he had memorized it.

He had memorized it in three days.

The engineer turned on the tape. The playback of the orchestra comes over the phones. Rafe plucks out his first sequence. Fifteen minutes later, he was done. He nailed it in one take.

Rafe reloaded the thing onto the Queen Mary and floated off toward the Holland Tunnel back to Nutley.

He had some kind of trust fund. Never worked a job in his life. Never had to hack away at wedding band work like me and everyone I knew. He just concentrated on becoming a rock star, a harp playing rock star. He managed to get the attention of Pete Townsend of the Who, who produced a record of his music.

We'd go out. I'd have a beer. Rafe would have fifteen.

"Damn it Rob. I'm gonna make it."

He'd point to the TV over the bar. MTV was on.

"See that? That's gonna be me. I'm gonna be on that thing, or I'm gonna die tryin'. And I'm gonna make you a star too, 'cause you're my pal, Rob"

"Rafe, you always do this, man. You always get so wound up. Can't we just once have a drink and relax. Rock stardom will wait 'till tomorrow, baby. Chill!"

He managed to get the keyboard gig on the English folksy band "Renaissance". He kept on coming close, but no cigar.

Had substance abuse issues that lead him down some dark paths. One night in Myrtle Beach, he took it into his head that he had to speak with someone in the Atlantic Beach area. Had something to apologize for.

It's a very bad part of town. Everyone knows not to get caught there after dark. Rafe shows up at midnight, drunk, making a lot of noise, asking the wrong questions of the wrong people in front of the wrong bar. Gets beaten almost to death.

I rushed to the Grand Strand Hospital. They let me in to see him, but he was unconscious. He was also unrecognizable. Took him a year to come back from that. They almost screwed up his hands for good.

Moves out to LA, chasing that rock star dream. Hooks up with two producer guys who are perpetually on the verge of getting him a record deal.

Whole damn town is filled, stuffed to capacity, with folks who are on the verge, on the absolute cusp of just about getting a deal, just about getting over. Rafe joined the happy, expectant throng.

"My deal is gonna be signed next week, Rob. Absolutely. And I want you to be on the record. Absolutely. "

I'm out there visiting my pals Andy and Diane. Me and Andy and Rafe decide to catch a Dodger game. Boys night out.

Rafe asks us to meet him at the corner of Los Felices and something. Andy and I roll up at the appointed time.

Rafe is there, blond hair swept back. Dark shades on at 6:30 PM. All black. Black leather jacket. A visual non sequitor, standing out in Bas Relief from the surrounding scenery in the pastel rich Los Angeles twilight.

He's holding a large, ungainly, oval thing. As we get close, we see it is an ancient wallet, all busted out, stuffed with so many little bits of paper that it looks like a burrito with everything falling out of it.

It was his filing cabinet. It was his way of organizing his universe. Who am I to argue with a man's system? I got my own. And I'll thank you not to laugh at mine, too.

Andy is engrossed in the game, but me and Rafe can't stop talking about other stuff. He's telling me stories about hanging out with Bernstein, hanging out with Aaron Copland, one of the greatest American composers of the twentieth century.

Game's over and we drop him off at the same corner. Had no idea what his plan was, and he didn't let us in on it,, so we didn't pry. Maybe he got beamed up every night to Mother Ship Rafe, which makes a low swing into Earth orbit every once in a while.

Not long after that, word came through the grapevine that Rafe fell into a pretty dark period. Drugs, whatever.

Then, I got the call. There was a road rage incident. Some altercation on the 10 between his car and a truck. He was, by all accounts, the aggressor. He was hospitalized and died three days later.

I threw my phone against the wall. Then, I threw it against the refrigerator. I cried so hard the snot dripped down my face. I dropped to my knees and cursed. I cursed everything.

How could this happen? I always thought he was, sort of, "protected". Protected by something that sat on his shoulder and kept him from pushing the envelope too far. Maybe he was. Maybe he just ran out the string. I don't know. I was furious. My crazy harpist friend was gone and there was nothing to be done about it.

A year later, I'm back in Beloit. The phone rings: "Turn on the TV, now!!"

Flick it on. It was the “Jonathon Edwards Cross Country Show.” I love this show. It has ghosts in it.

This guy from long Island with a seemingly unlimited collection of Banana Republic sweaters is a psychic. He walks out into a gallery of a hundred and fifty people arranged in bleachers like they’re about to watch a basketball game.

He is handed a mike, and ranges around the room, homing in on people whose relatives are trying to make contact with them through him from “the other side”. I love this show. Speak, ghost, speak!!

It was taped two weeks ago. As I tuned in, Jonathon was prowling restlessly around the room. People were looking at him yearningly. You could see what they were thinking: “ Please, Jonathon, please. I know my Dad is trying to reach me.” “Please. It’s my Mom. I know she’s out there. Come here. Bring your microphone, here!’

Sitting in the fourth row were the two record producer guys Rafe knew. They were unwittingly about to be actors in a drama they had no idea they were destined to participate in. They had agreed to attend the taping to support some friends who were there to contact the spirit of their departed Mother. They didn’t believe in this stuff, but they couldn’t say no, so they came.

Jonathon is ranging around, still. Then, he stops talking. He stops looking around. He drifts over to their section of the bleachers. He addresses the section in the kind of aggressive demeanor that is intrinsic to Long Islanders:

“Uh....here....I’m picking up something really strong....right here.”

He waves at the general area the two guys are sitting in.

People all around these guys go nuts. They’re calling out to him like they’re on “The Price is Right:”

“Jonathon, over here!! It’s my sister” My sister must be trying reach me!”

“My daughter, my God, it’s my daughter. Jonathon!!”

He holds up his hand.

“No, No...please...please...”

Shifts his weight to the other foot. Frowns.

“Does somebody know an R word person,....I’m getting Raul...”

Ralph.....Ray...Ray....RAFE? Could it be, like , Rafe?"

The camera guy, who is a genius at capturing these moments, gets a two shot of these producer guys with their mouths dropped open like Tweedle Dee and Tweedle - Deed - lee - er.

One of them gets up the nerve to raise his hand. "Uh, we had a friend who passed....."

Jonathon nods. The penny just dropped. "Yeah, it's him."

Very matter of fact. A day at the office for Jonathon Edwards. Just earning his bread and butter.

"He's doing something...." Look of confusion on Edward's face... "he's fiddling with something, something that he wants to show you so you know it's him. It'sjeez... it's like a big, worn out wallet.....There are all these little pieces of paper, like, falling out of this thing.. Does that mean anything to you guys?"

Mouths open. Tweedle and Dweedle..

"He wants you to know that he's ok. He's fine. Some kind of car crash, but he wants you to know that wasn't why he died. It was something else, but it was his time."

Edwards goes on, speaking for Rafe from the other side, for a few minutes. The producers had edited the tape and were showing photos of Rafe over the voice over: Rafe playing the harp. Rafe performing with "Renaissance."

"He wants you to know he's very happy and content and not to worry about him. "

And then the show was over. I turned off my TV.

TV hasn't been the same, since. It's phosphorescent glow still permeates my room, but it's not the same. What could top that? Not Hitler, not the UFO's.

My God, Rafe is playing the harp in Heaven? Is that supposed to be some kind of joke? Is he also, like, sitting on a cotton cloud and wearing an aluminum halo?

My friend Rafe got his wish. He made it. He was on TV. Said he was gonna do it or die tryin'. Jeez, baby, watch out what you wish for.

The Deadly Meatball Rumble

In 2002, I was in my fourth year as Music Director and Conductor of the Beloit Janesville Symphony in Wisconsin. The symphony, along with all the other area performing arts groups, was trying to raise money to convert an old high school auditorium into a state of the art Performing Arts Center, so we'd all have a good place to perform.

To this end, I found myself in the middle of the first of several weekends conducting the pit orchestra for a community theater production of "Annie". The run was sold out, and we were raising \$60,000 for the Center. Everyone was happy.

After the show, we'd all hang out at a local place called "Spirits".

It's Saturday night after the show. I saunter in and notice a buffet table in the corner. Help myself to a couple of Swedish meatballs and take the plate back to my crew on the other side of the club. Whole cast is there.

But soon, out of the corner of my eye, I see some very wiry, very drunk guy gesticulating at me, yelling something to his friends, who are holding him back, and I know we have a spot of trouble right here in River City.

Seems the buffet was not put out by the bar. It is from a private birthday party and this cat is furious I horned in and stole his food.

Look, this may seem trivial to you, dear reader, ensconced as you may be in your Ikea barca lounge on 85th and Amsterdam, but this is Janesville, and this stuff is, like, poisonously serious. Trust me. I been out here long enough to know.

It's time for our hero to make a graceful exit. No goodbyes, I grab my coat and head for the door. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the guy steaming up behind me, and he's got his whole posse right behind him,

So, there I am in the parking lot of Spirits, surrounded by a horde of angry burghers. The guy is standing in front of me now. He is so angry he is frothing at the mouth. And you can imagine the monologue:

Where did I get off stealing his food? Who the hell did I think I was? And then he started in with some very personal sexual references. He was quite forthright in offering some interesting intimations regarding my probable choice of sexual partners. And I promise you, he didn't liken me to John Wayne.

Now, I'm making all the appropriate calming noises. I'm apologizing. I'm reaching for my wallet to give him money, the whole shot.

And here's why. Here is the big fat freaking why. If this guy throws a punch, and I'm talking even one punch, my life, my cushy Maestro life, is over.

'Cause it will hit the front page of the Janesville Gazette tomorrow. And it won't matter if I just stand there like a martyred saint and let this jerk wail on me, the headline will read: "Beloit Janesville Symphony Conductor in Bar Brawl. "

And that's all it will take. The Board of Directors, the very conservative Board of Directors, will have my butt on a Greyhound bound for Hoboken before the ink is dry on the newsprint. You can take it to the bank, dear reader.

So, I'm sweatin'. I'm prayin'.

And then I realize, look, if this yokel actually takes a swing at me, I'm screwed anyway, right? Totally screwed, no matter what. So, at least I will have the satisfaction of deconstructing his inbred goober face on my way out. Cold comfort, but I'll leave town like a man, at least. Like a man, Godfather!

So, I'm waiting for the first punch. I'm waiting for the shit to jump off.

I've pretty much calculated his body weight and center of gravity. Figure I'll go for the gut first, because he's expecting me to go for the face and he won't be covering up down there, then I'll launch him into the Janesville night with an upper cut. Just like Mike Tyson did to Spinks in the first thirty seconds of round one in Atlantic City, April, 1991. Popped his mouth protector up into the stratosphere like Apollo 12. It was a thing of beauty, fight fans.

Lights out, jerky!! Enjoy your meatballs when you wake up, you creep, if you can still chew.

And his friends are tryin' to talk him down: "Wiggy. Wiggy. You're drunk.. He didn't mean nothin', man. Just let it go. It's cold out here. Come on, I'll buy you a drink. Screw this."

Wiggy? Wiggy ? His friends call him Wiggy? And, trust me, one look at him, faithful reader, and I am sure you would concur, he didn't pick up that moniker because of his extensive collection of exotic toupees.

No, this cat was crazy as a shtihouse rat. And here I am, doin' that time honored Saturday night dance out in the misty parking lot with Wiggy.

Just then, the entire cast of “Annie” pours out of Spirits and assembles behind me, like they’re hitting their marks on the set of an imaginary movie.

And I’m talking everyone, with all the crew, and the orphans. How the hell did the orphans get in the bar to begin with? Is it “Eight year old girls drink free” night at Spirits?

So, there we are. Mexican standoff. Me and Wiggy pawing our hooves in the dirt, and all the troops massing for battle behind us.

But, see, Wiggy’s troops look mean, man, like the crew of the Pequod after Moby Dick ate the boat.

Me, I got the cast of “Annie”. And everyone, including most of the guys, still had their stage makeup on. Dripping down their face in the damp night,; rouge, Pancake number 4, face powder. I turned around and looked at them. It was grotesque.

Here I am in a bar fight, and I got the zombie chorus from “Thriller” covering my back. What could possibly go wrong?

These are musical theatre people. They learned everything they know about gang warfare from watching “West Side Story” fifty seven times. Any minute, I expected them to start snapping their fingers and kicking their toes up in the air. “A boy like that, who killed your brother !!”

God help me, I was in trouble.

Then, Wiggy blinked. Actually, he hiccupped and looked like he was about to puke. I know an exit cue when I see one.

I vanished like Brigadoon into the mist of the Scottish Highlands, my faithful readers.

My hands were shaking on the whole ride home. I had just come within a hair’s breath of watching everything I’d put together out here swallowed up on a damp night in a shitty bar parking lot.

From here on out, Swedish meatballs are off the menu for our hero.

A Weekend at Casa Mayhem

In September of 2008, things were very tense with my gig as Music Director of my Midwestern orchestra.

The Executive Director decamped and the box she left behind that was supposed to contain the budget for the coming year was as empty as the promises of a carny con man.

The economic downturn that swept Obama into office like a Tsunami, well, that was just offshore while we were enjoying a Daiquiri in a Cabana on the beach.

Time for our hero to get out of Dodge for a coke and a smile and some perspective.

So, my pal Annie Potts, star of stage and screen and one of my favorite people in the world, invites me for a weekend of relaxation in her home in Tarzana, California, near LA. Tarzana was founded by Edgar

Rice Burroughs in the '20s, who funded it with his earnings from his novel, Tarzan.

I roll up to Casa Mayhem (Annie's name for what turns out to be an exquisite, sprawling Hacienda in the style of old Hollywood. Previously owned by Robert Montgomery and then Robert Wagner and Natalie Wood).

Perfect place for our hero to lick his wounds, study some scores, leave the weirdness behind for a few days.

It's 6:00 PM on a Thursday. Annie says: "Rob, you can go out and do whatever or just hang here, 'cause in about an hour, the place is going to be overrun with actors. We're rehearsing for a staged reading of a new play by Chris Canaan called "Asunder" that we're doing on Saturday night."

What am I gonna do, go out and throw rocks at street signs? Stay in my room and wash my socks? Worry about my life? No, I gratefully chose to be a fly on the wall and sit in on the reading.

The actors show up. I recognize many of them from TV, but I can't recall their names.

The reading begins. The thing is marvelous. Chris Canaan is a genius.

It's a dark comedy about the vagaries of divorce, starring Chris playing himself under a stage name. The piece is anchored by his best friend, Sammy, who sits in a bar with him and expounds about life.

Sammy was a successful psychiatrist who chucked it all after his own divorce and bought a Harley dealership. Never looked back. Plum part. Lovable, if somewhat acerbic wise ass.

Annie plays Chris' estranged wife.

Rehearsal ends. Cast leaves. Chris and Annie and the director, a stunning redhead named Josie DiVincenzo, retire to the Casa Mayhem living room. I join them.

As soon as the door is closed on the last departing actor, they all put their heads in their hands and moan. Moan! Strangest thing I've ever seen. Like something out of Aristophanes. "The Gods have decreed that a plague must descend on Thrace.!" Something like that. What gives?

Turns out, they all thought the guy playing the best friend, Sammy, absolutely sucked. Some Irish American comedian out of Boston. Been on TV and everything.

But, the word around the couch was; he didn't get the humor, he didn't get the piece, he didn't get the rhythm, and he didn't get the relationship with Chris, which was the nail in his coffin, I guess, 'cause they were wringing their hands and tryin to think of everyone under the sun they could call at the last minute who could come in and do the play the day after tomorrow.

I thought the guy was alright. But what do I know?

I'm the Maestro of an orchestra that's waving in the breeze back in Beloit. I'm just tryin' to have that coke and a smile out here. No tension. No drama, please! But, it's LA. It ain't Des Moines, Rob. Place was built on drama.

Natalie Wood probably sat in the chair I'm in right now. Robert Father Knows Best Montgomery roamed these halls at midnight. Drama drips from the stucco. So, shut up and maybe you'll learn something.'

So, they're wringing their hands. Can't think of anybody who can do it, who'll look right and be right and can just come in and do it on Saturday night.

Then Annie, with a weird light in her eye, looks up, like straight at me: "Do you think you could do this part, Rob?"

Now, this is not as nuts as you may think. Annie and I met a couple of years ago under the auspices of an Arts/Spiritual Retreat thing we both go to on the East Coast in summertime. And we'd acted together in a couple of after dinner skits. So, she knew I could, at least, act.

Now, I've been around the block far too many times, dear reader, to blush and stub my toe in the ground and say Aw, shucks. So, having no shame at all, I pipe up with:

"Yeah, Annie. I could do that part."

Eyebrows go up all around.

I go on: "Look, let's go back into the dining room and have me and Chris read a couple of the Charlie (Chris' character) and Sammy scenes

in the bar. If it works, it works. If it don't, hell, I'm just the house guest.. I'm just here to catch some rays."

We go back in. Josie, the director, is looking at me real close. Chris seems amused. Annie's got this look on her face. I think she knows how this is gong to play out.

And now, a footnote:

A month before this trip, I called Annie and was bemoaning my fate out in the Midwest. What to do? With Annie, there are no rhetorical questions. She's about action:

"Rob , you need to call Chris Canaan. He's a screenwriter and an Astrologer. He will give you the perspective you need on your situation."

So, I arrange for a telephone Astrological reading with Chris. He give me a spot on overview of my situation, and it helps me navigate through some pretty funky waters.

He also tells me, in what is about to become a very cogent aside, that our Astrological charts, his and mine, are sort of linked, connected.

Turns out: I am a Gemini with Leo "rising" and he is a Leo with Gemini "rising". Go figure, we're like brothers separated at birth. Yin and Yang, Alphonse and freakin' Gastone.

Now, this rather arcane bit of knowledge is about to form an interesting part of the puzzle as we sit down to read a scene between Charlie and Sammy.

We begin to speak, and it's like we'd been friends for all our lives. No hesitation, nothing. Two jerks, joined at the hip in their favorite bar, pissin' and moanin' about love, life, and Oh, what the hell can you do about the women out there? Skin you alive, my friend. They'll take no prisoners.

Josie asks me to read the scene again with a different approach, then again with another tack, entirely. I get the gig. Dig that.

Now, I hadn't really acted since I was on the road with the Smothers Brothers thirty years ago, but I missed it. I always missed it.

It's a funny thing. The actor's stock in trade is a repertoire of emotions that ring the chimes of a life, lived. Now, if you've been reading this book , you know what I've been through. For better or worse, I've

lived. I've lived some kinda life, anyway.

So, although I haven't been practicing the craft of acting, I guess everything I've been through has dropped down into some internal, psychic hopper and gestated around in there, like a stew.

Because, it all came out on Saturday night.

I couldn't hold myself back if I tried. Over the top? Over the top? I would have needed a rear view mirror to see "over the top" in the dust behind me as I plowed my way through this thing.

I was more alive on stage that Saturday night, more emotionally present and emotionally available in that piece, than I have ever been in my life. I never wanted it to end.

(Also, it don't hurt that, let's face it, I was on a plane to Beloit in two days, so, if I stunk up the joint, what were they going to do, fire me, take back my salary, which, there was none?)

Josie comes up to me after the reading, throws her arms around me and tells me that, if the show goes, she would be happy to cast me as Sammy anywhere, anytime

Hugging Annie goodbye two days later, I said: "Honey, where else can you go on vacation and get cast in a play three hours after your plane lands? I'm down with Randy Newman: "I love LA!!

A Good Girl and a Bad Girl

Rob Morrow, the actor, saw *Wicked* on Broadway and not only did he love it, but he was sure that his three year old daughter would love it, too. Her name is Tu. Yes. Tu Morrow. And I thought I was saddled with a bad pun name. Sheesh.

He reserves two seats way in the back of the house on the aisle on a Saturday night. Figures, if she starts getting antsy, he scoops her up and hits the lobby for a while. Standard parental procedure. No sweat.

So, he shows up with little Tu on the appointed Saturday evening at the huge Gershwin theatre on Broadway. Gives his tickets to the usher. Is escorted to his seats.

And he follows her as she leads him closer and closer to the front of the house. And he realizes, to his horror, that some well meaning ticket sales person must have recognized his celebrity name and spontaneously upgraded his tickets. No back of the house stall for Mr. Morrow! Mr. Morrow and his daughter will be seated in the third row, dead center, about ten feet in front of the pit and the stage!

Swallowing hard, he picks her up and begins to sidle past all the patrons in that row: "Scuse me... 'scuse me, please", who are drilling him with these very angry looks. They just paid over a hundred dollars a pop for orchestra seats on a sold out Saturday night on Broadway and it don't take Nostra freakin' damus to predict that a three year old girl, seated, like, four seats away, is gonna turn your night on the town into a night from whiny, crying hell. Yeah, that was a tough sideways perp walk for Mr. Morrow on the way to the seats.

The lights come down. Orchestra starts the show. Lights up onstage. She's seated in his lap. Mouth wide open in wonder.

Whole first act passes like that. Lights up at intermission, and now all the fellow patrons are cooing to him: "That little girl is as good as gold." "Maybe I should bring my nieces to see this." Like that.

"Tu, honey, you must be tired, and this is really long. Maybe you should go beddy by, sweetie."

"No, daddy, I want to see what's gonna happen to the lady, the green lady."

OK. Lights down. Act II.

Wicked is the story of two sisters (or is it friends, I can never remember) in Oz whose parallel lives turn them into Glenda the Good Witch and what's her name, the evil green witch who was played by Margaret Hamilton in the movie "Wizard of Oz" Very clever.

It's three quarters of the way through the second act. Edena Menzel, the star, is playing the green girl who is about to make a pact with the dark forces that will turn her inexorably into an evil witch. She is about to transform in front of our eyes.

She comes down in one, right at the edge of the stage. She opens a huge Necromicon (a codex of evil spells) She kneels down. She points to the appropriate spell. She cackles. She swoons. The music swells to a fever pitch. Conductor cuts it off. Dead silence. Edena opens her mouth. Here it comes.

Then, in an impossibly clear and loud voice, Tu, in the third row, calls out: "You're a bad girl!!!"

Edena loses it. The conductor loses it. The orchestra loses it. The audience completely loses it. This could be the definition of "stopping the show".

Welcome to the Great White Way, little Tu Morrow!

The Great Janesville Train Wreck

Showbiz is like working on the railroad. If something goes wrong with the tracks, there's gonna be a train wreck. Ask Casey Jones. Ask Milli Vanilli. Ask Ashley Simpson.

In this case, we're talking about pre-recorded musical audio tracks, which are surreptitiously added to a live performance to sweeten (enhance) it. The performers are onstage. There's a guy backstage with a computer and a CD. He pushes a button. The audience hears a blended mix, part live, part Memorex. Nobody's supposed to be any the wiser, Ollie. Most of the time, that's true.

The Who were performing "Won't Get Fooled Again." The guy backstage pushed the wrong button and the synthesizer track came in at the

wrong time. Pete Townsend came offstage and threw the guy across the room, bounced him off the wall.

Milli Vanilli were singing their hit at a Berlin disco. The track skipped and the audience heard: “ Girl I wanna....girl I wanna... girl I wanna..” Woopsy! They’re not singing. They’re lip synching. A month later, they gave their Grammys back. Ten years later, one of them committed suicide.

Ashley Simpson, whose star was on the rise, did Saturday Night Live. Her drummer pushed the wrong button. Woopsy! How can she be singing if her mouth isn’t moving? She did a little jig for the nationwide audience. Ended her career, toot sweet.

So, my blood ran cold when the phone rang:

“Hi, Rob. It’s Johnny, Donny’s Music Director. I want to talk to you about the tracks.”

It was September, 2004. I was gonna conduct a pops concert with my orchestra in Wisconsin. Donny Osmond. He’s coming to Janesville with a four piece rock band to which would be added our forty five piece orchestra.

Donny, the rock band, and I would be wearing earpieces over which we would hear the track. The track contains a metronomic click, pre -recorded horns, percussion, and background vocals.

Here’s the fun part. No earpieces for the orchestra. They can’t hear any of that stuff. The conductor’s job (that would be me) is to keep them together with Donny and the rock band.

A month before the gig, the music arrives. I have one orchestra rehearsal before the day of the performance. I call Johnny. I can barely hear him. He’s with Donny in a helicopter.

“Sorry Rob, you’ll have to speak louder!!”

“I said: are these charts clean!!!? (Is the music accurate? Are these the exact arrangements you’re going to do?)”

“Absolutely, man. We did them with an orchestra in London a couple of years ago.”

A lot can happen in a couple of years.

Day of the performance. I have a rehearsal with the orchestra, then a rehearsal with the rock band and the orchestra, then one with Donny and the

whole shebang.

Orchestra rehearsal goes well. The rock band comes on.

The earpieces go in. The guy pushes the button and.... hey nonny nonny, whadda ya know, the tracks don't match the orchestra arrangements. Not at all.

Johnny comes over to me after I'd stopped the orchestra in mid song for the third time. He's the bass player as well as the alleged Music Director. He's playing the bass part and singing in my ear what he thinks the track arrangement has morphed into. I'm scribbling the changes in my score. My heart is pounding like Gene Krupa on smack.

I turn to the orchestra. They don't look happy at all.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, take out your pencils, please. Here is the new arrangement. Delete everything from letter C to letter E.

At the end of letter H, I will hold up my hand. Stop playing. There will be a sixteen bar percussion solo. When I bring my hand down again, we will be at letter Q. Play to the end as written.

Thank you for your patience. (Have a nice day. Let's all go to Disneyland. It ain't my fault). 'Course I can't say the stuff in parentheses.

I made similar speeches as we fumbled our way through the other nine numbers Donny was gonna sing with the orchestra.

At the end of the rehearsal, I was met offstage by the house manager, Laurel. I musta looked like Scrooge after he'd seen Marley's ghost. I had sweated through my tuxedo. She took one look at my face and dragged me to her car. I collapsed into an exhausted stupor in her guest bedroom. She shook me awake and I took a shower.

Showtime. Sold out house. Donny hits the stage. All the women in the audience go crazy. He's great.

I had no idea if my little aerial balancing act was gonna work. Somehow, it did. Donny never knew what went down at the rehearsal.

Donny grabs me at the end. He's happy. I do the bow with him and his rock band at the edge of the stage. Johnny, the Music Director, bows and puts his arm on my shoulder. He leans in:

"Rob, man, thank you. You saved my ass. I owe you a drink."

“Keep your drink, dude. You owe me a car.”

I shoulda listened to my mother. She told me over and over again:
“Robbie, stay away from the tracks.”

335 TDC – The End is the Beginning

Everything ends somewhere, and this is that.

Thanks for hangin' in, dear reader.

I love you. I love you as much as I love anyone. If we ever meet, I'll kiss you on the cheek and I'll buy you one, 'cause you hung in. With me. With this.

This is how I became a musician.

The Beatles came on Ed Sullivan on February 9th, 1964. We were in a collective hangover from the Kennedy Assassination, and the advent of the four mop tops was just what the doctor ordered.

After that show, I wanted to be John Lennon.

I started staring into a mirror in the basement, strumming a tennis racket while "Meet The Beatles" played on my sister's plastic juke box. Tried to get my mouth to look like his did when he sang "Twist and Shout".

No one could get me to stop. I was putting myself in a trance. I was boring a hole into the future. I was being there.

Couple weeks later I'm in bed with the mumps. Dad stops by the room. He's going to the store, wants to know can he get me anything.

"Yeah, Dad. Get me a guitar." Wise ass. But watch out what you say to the Old Man.

Comes back with a fourteen dollar steel string folk guitar.

I banged on that thing day and night. "For Your Love" by the Yardbirds. Three chords, no waiting. Rock and Roll is immediate.

Six months later. "Well, Robbie, how do you like your guitar?"

“It’s cool Dad, but now what I really want is an electric guitar.” Watch what you say to the Old Man. He nods.

Goes down to his workroom. He’s an electrical engineer and designer. Works for Lionel Trains in Irvington, where he grew up.

Puts it in a vise. Solders a pickup onto it. (Don’t ask me where he got a pickup from, ‘cause I don’t know) Mounts a volume control under the pickup. Hands it back to me.

“Here.”

A year later, when he saw I still couldn’t put the damn thing down, he takes me to Manny’s Music in Manhattan, the Mecca, the ground zero, center of the universe for electric guitars.

Buys me a 1965 Gibson cherry red 335 TDC electric guitar with dot fret markers and a flying tailpiece, and an Ampeg Reverberocket II amplifier. It was a toss up between the Gibson or a purple Gretsch Tennessean, ‘cause that’s what David Crosby played in The Byrds.

If I still had that guitar I could trade it in for a down payment on a house.

He drove me to rehearsals of my first group “The Barons”. We had a logo and business cards.

He would sit outside Jon Gams’ house. We would have the same conversation every time on the way home.

“Just tell me one thing, Robbie: Does it have to be so goddamn loud?”

“Yeah, Dad. Actually, it does.”

He died before he got to see me play guitar on Broadway for “Tommy” and “The Lion King” and “Les Miz” and “Evita.”

He didn’t get to see me open up for the Beach Boys, or for Charlie Mingus or Bill Evans, or Stephane Grapelli.

He didn’t get to see me conduct the London Symphony Orchestra at Abbey Road Studios in London.

But he started me off on the way to all that, and how do you say thanks? Well, writing this, maybe that’s a start.

Thanks, Pop.

