

Memoirs of a Cocktail Pianist,  
Chapter One, My Hat

Among my souvenirs: a note reading “Can you play Hey Jude?” signed by George McGovern.

If you’ve served any time on D.C.’s power cocktail circuit over the last thirty years there’s a good chance you’ve heard me tickling the ivories in the background, maybe “All the Things You Are” (complete with Dizzy Gillespie intro), or if I’m in a pop-y mood, Dido’s “Thank You.” The latter, by the way, scored big with an 8th grader via the Eminem connection when I played it one morning at the D.C. Public School where I teach.

On my break you’ve either seen me sidling up to the refreshment table or, if forbidden to feed, hungrily eyeing the same. In the last fifteen years or so, you’ve had the added thrill of seeing me sporting what my daughter has dubbed the “ethnically ambiguous hat.” The need for said hat became evident back in the mid 90s when various band photographs were marred by apparent flashes of light emanating from the top of my head. Finding the right hat can be as hard as finding your soul mate, and I finally found my hat *beskert* via a saxophonist, via a guitar player. While they both eventually moved on, I remain faithful because of the events of one fateful night.

It was a particularly uptight gig, one where you have to play so soft that people can murmur over you without breaking a sweat and the barest hint of a Boogie Woogie left hand draws pursed lips and narrowed eyes from the Event Coordinator. You play the ironclad tunes to which no one can object, “Over the Rainbow” or “As Time Goes By.” So, eyes closed, I’m all into it when suddenly the exemplar of uncool appears beside me. “Ah, Excuse me...”

Startled, the verbal-social part of my brain wakes up --if I'm in a hostile mood, I'll stop when someone talks to me while I'm playing. I'll stop right on the BII<sup>7</sup> chord and the whole room can wallow in unresolved harmonic tension -- but this time I kept on tinkling and simply shot a polite interrogative look in her direction.

"The Managing Partner would like you to remove your hat." She paused. As I kept the ambient mood going on the keyboard, I thought "forget this!" Then, as my fingers vamped for time, she continued, a little flustered, "Unless of course you're wearing it for religious reasons." While superficially I just kept playing "What a Wonderful World," inside the heavens opened up, "Skies of Blue, Clouds of White" indeed!

"Actually I am," I managed to croak out and from then on it's been part of my religion that people don't get to tell me what to wear on my head.

When I took an extended gig with the Holland America Cruise Company, I wasn't sure whether the hat would pass muster since I was sent an info packet with a detailed on/off duty dress code. But, perhaps owing to the international character of those on board, the hat passed. A good thing for me too as the Dutch masters of that ship ruled with an iron hand. Of course it is only good sense to not allow musicians in the casino, but forbidding us to dance with passengers ought to be against the Geneva Convention.

Being some decades older and more experienced than my twenty- something band mates, it wasn't long before they each came to me privately, "Um Jim, do you have any musical advice for me?" As the show band, we backed up the Vegas style entertainers, including a juggler who spit/juggled two ping pong balls with his mouth. While we rehearsed for those shows we were playing dance gigs ad lib. Thus my response to everyone's

inquiry, “Dude, you sound great, I just think we ought to rehearse as a band, you know, work on our endings.”

Eventually we worked up the collective nerve to approach Diettrich, the all powerful staff captain. He gave us grudging permission to use the lounge for rehearsal after we finished playing at midnight, but warned us, in his Shwarzenegger accented English, that if our rehearsal turned into a party with passengers “Y’ ahss will be grahss and Ah’ll be the lawn mowah.” Go ahead say it like Arnold, it still cracks me up.

Mon Chapeau didn’t pass totally without comment however. As music director on board I was gifted with a beeper so if an officer noticed that a band was late, or even taking a short break, I would get beeped and it would be my good fortune to run down and remedy the situation. There was a recalcitrant Russian quartet on board; a singer married to a sax player with a keyboard/drum rhythm section. One night the singer says to me “Jim, I dreamed about you last night” (Me: smiling politely) “ I was in bed with my husband, we were making love,” (TMI!) “and I saw you. Or rather first I saw your hat, and then I heard you, you were telling us we were late and had to go play.”

I did the Music Director gig solely to have my own room so my daughter could visit me on board, and indeed tooling around Tortolla on scooters with her made it all worthwhile, not to mention doing Jaeger shots in the officers bar -- priceless. But the beeper was the bane of my existence. The last Thursday on board I was playing a show where at one point in the act I was supposed to express surprise. Lately I’d been pushing the envelope on that one, but that night the Spirit entered me and I fell off the piano stool in an expression of surprise worthy of classic vaudeville. As an added bonus I later found that my fall had broken the beeper, so my last few days on board were spent in peace.

Splink, splank splunk (Count Basie ending).