

Memoirs of a Cocktail Pianist

By James D. Levy

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2) The Club

3) Singers

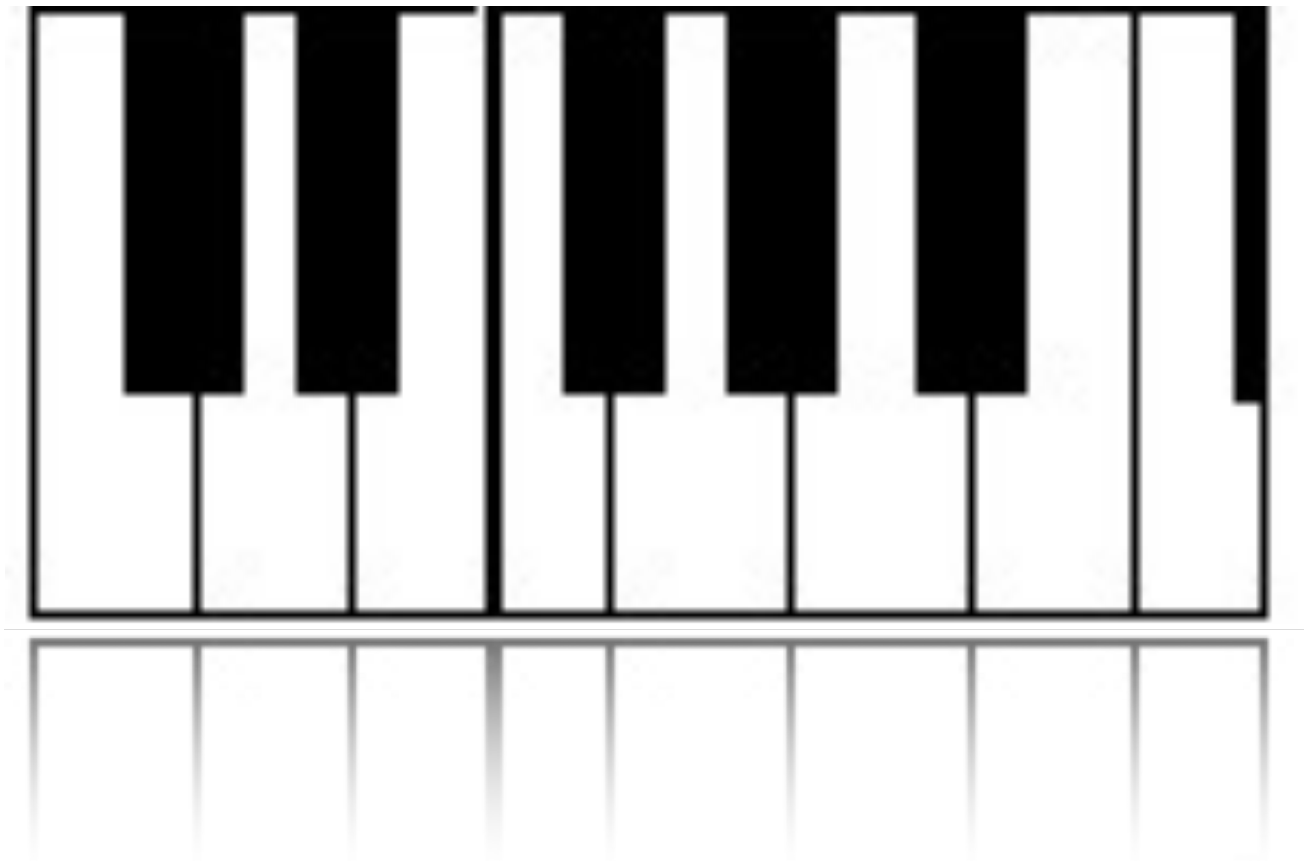
4) Gigs

5) Bands

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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 taught at the time.

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 my “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 beshert 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 bII7 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 was a pathetic sop to better the Dutch Officers own romantic/lustful efforts.

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, ah 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 sidles up to me and and murmurs, "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 Tortola 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).



Memoirs of a Cocktail Pianist: Chapter Two, The Club

Among my souvenirs: An ad in the Washington Post for Blues Alley in which my name and Dizzy Gillespie's both appear.

In Washington DC, the premiere Jazz club is Blues Alley. There are other contenders to be sure, the (now sadly defunct) Bohemian Caverns was rich with the spirit of John Coltrane, the august Kennedy Center is host to many a jazz luminary, but it is Blues Alley that racks up the most dates with big name stars and has been doing so since the mid 60s. On occasion the Alley will open up to us local peons and we'll get to play on the same stage that once -- heck, many a time -- held Dizzy and the rest of the pantheon.

In the early 1980s the club decided that they would augment their business by hosting a happy hour. A series of pianists held that gig and I was fortunate enough to have had it for a period of some months. It's a gig that I could have gotten all uptight for, but I just told myself, Dude, you may not be the best jazz pianist in the world, but just try and play as pretty as you can. Sure enough, every night I poured my heart out at the keyboard, shakily skating that fine line between corny and truly expressive, and when I looked up, it would be break time, the sets just flew by.

On occasion I would look up and there would be the musicians who were headlining a few hours later. Usually not the stars, but the bass players. Thus I got to play with Stan Getz's bass player, Claude Bolling's bass player...

One time I looked up from some slow jam and there was Wynton Marsalis' bass player, Charnett Moffett all of 16 years old, and behind him Wynton and Branford Marsalis. Wasting no time, I welcomed them to the Blues Alley stage and asked if they wanted to play a tune. Branford said sure and I think they asked me what I wanted to play. We ended up playing "All The Things You Are," and I remember that when Wynton played it was like he was playing a clarinet in terms of how effortlessly he moved from the low register to a super high, yet super controlled, register.

While Wynton and Charnett split, Branford played a ballad with me, "In a Sentimental Mood." About 30 years later I would get the chance to play again with Wynton. He delivered a lecture at the Kennedy Center and there was a reception on the campus of GWU, where I taught Jazz piano and Jazz band. I was invited to bring a group to play and we had two of the best trumpet students we'd ever been blessed with, Marcus R. and Phil C. We were groovin' on the jazz standards, and also getting applause and approval from one of the other VIP guests, Linda Ronstadt, a high school idol of mine.



Then Wynton came by, gave us a grin and vanished into the main room, only to reappear shortly with a mouthpiece in his hand and a twinkle in his eye. Oblivious to the Jazz Musician Code of Cool, Detached Behaviour my wife had gone up to Wynton and gushed to him my story of playing with him once, back in the day. Borrowing one of the trumpet player's horns, he sat in and once again we hit it off with "All The Things You Are." This time I got my picture taken with him and I look forward to playing again, maybe 30 years from now when

we're both in our 80s.

But back to Blues Alley, at times the night time slot would open up for local performers. This typically would happen when the artist was having a CD release. One memorable gig I did at Blues Alley was the CD release party of a Klezmer/Jazz fusion CD spearheaded by the Clarinet/Violin powerhouse of Seth Kibel and Susan Jones. I'm always in kind of a daze before a concert type gig, practicing stuff in my mind, and I'm not so much of a talker under those conditions, so I kind of orbited around a number of different conversations.

Susan and Seth were discussing the fact that they chose to release the CD (remember those?) under their own names, rather than contrive a cute group name. They then started trading their favorite Klezmer band names. It was an astonishing volley:

"Nice Jewish Girls Gone Bad" leered Susan.

"Yid Vicious," fired back Seth.

"The Vulgar Bulgars,"

"Java Jews,"

"Jewbilee,"

"The Chopped Liver River Band,"

"Garlic & Onions,"

"Klezmofobia,"

"Klezperanto,"

"Klezcore,"

"The Extreme Klezmer Makeover,"

"Klezcentricity,"

"The Kelsbians"

It was too much. I fled to the table where Tom the drummer, who was also the musician's union contractor for Ford's theater at that time, was holding court. A couple of stage hands had come to check us out and they and Tom were all laying into the new version of "A Christmas Carol" that

had been foisted on them that year. In true marketing style it had a colon, "Scrooge: A Ghost Story." In my memory the stage hands have metamorphosed into Michael Palin and Eric Idle, they had that same comic incongruity, looking rough, like bikers, and talking like philosophers.

"They missed the whole bloody point," said Palin "It's not a ghost story, it's an exposition of the mechanism of Scrooge's redemption."

"Ya, the ghosts function as a catalyst for Scrooge to reexamine his value system, not as part of the marquee like fucking Ghostbusters," countered Idle.

"It's a castration, really," Palin went on "Dickens' use of the supernatural was a metaphor, holding a knife to the balls of unfettered Capitalism and crying repent now."

"It's always about castration with you," complained Idle who at times in my memory morphs into Alan Rickman.

Tom was quietly lamenting the fact that when the show had been titled "A Christmas Carol" (after Dickens) there had also been a beautiful and sensitive score arranged for a chamber orchestra of thirteen.

When we finally did hit the stage, I was ready to play, inspired by the talk of those who labor in the arts, happy to be playing with 5 of my musical friends, but haunted, haunted by the ghost of Jazz Life Past: 16 piece bands playing at swank downtown hotels, after hours clubs burning with fierce post-bop energy and Rock and Roll, with all of its nasty guitars, just a twinkle in the bloodshot eyes of Ike Turner.



Memoirs of a Cocktail Pianist: Chapter Three, Singers

Among my credits, playing piano on the 1997 debut CD of Jazz vocalist extraordinaire, Sharon Clark.



There are demigods who walk the face of this earth, multitalented individuals who are both first rate singers and Jazz pianists. Nat King Cole jumps to the front of that line, arm in arm with Ray Charles and, representing for D.C., is Shirley Horn, the artist Miles Davis said he wanted to be reincarnated as. However, for those of us mortals not twice blessed, we have to live in that tumultuous territory that exists when singers and pianists come together to perform.

Anything can happen.

Ultimately we pianists must bow before the awesome power of the voice. I accompanied a singer who sang with such power and beauty that at the end of the song the top rail bottles behind the bar grew little stick arms and clapped. I will always remember a gig I did with a white soul singer who channeled Aretha Franklin so closely that a black woman watching stood agog, her jaw dropping in amazement. On my long time church gig, I had a teenage girl who sang with the voice of an Angel. In addition to singing actual songs, I could play some chords on the piano and then just point at her and she would spontaneously sing something gorgeous that would soar above my harmonies.

The very best Jazz singers can be intimidating to work with, their senses are so finely tuned that if you play one chord out of place, it can earn you an arch glance. If the singer wants to take a horrible revenge, she can just wait 'til I'm at the pretty climax of my solo and then just as I'm closing the deal, she'll intone "Ladies and Gentlemen, Jim Levy on piano," the announcement cruelly drowning out my musical denouement.

The master singer has her finger on the pulse of the band and controls us accordingly. I was on a gig with an amazing singer (no names here, these people are fine without my additional endorsement) and the bass player was a technical marvel straight from my alma mater, Berklee College of Music in Boston. We were swinging "It Had To Be You" and after my one chorus solo, the bass player took a solo displaying the ethic that if he were to be paid by the note it might not be a bad thing. As he neared the end of his first chorus with no diminution or transition to the more laid back feel of the melody, the singer contemplated her re-entry and, clearly not

liking the prospects, urged the bass player on to a second chorus of a solo by drawling "go on baby, get it all out, get it aawll out."

You might think the more the merrier, but piano bar gigs, where people come and sing along can be purgatorial. How ironic that now when I'm called upon to play "Piano Man" in a piano bar so someone can try and sing like Billy Joel trying to sing like Bob Dylan, I often end up not being happy to be the eponymous piano man.

But even the group singing thing can, on rare occasion, have its moments of transcendence. Strictly speaking this wasn't a public bar, but the well attended Birthday Jam session party of my good friend Dave Marsh. So instead of a typical bar crowd there are musicians and singers and friends and family. Since he is a bass player par excellence, at any given moment there will be a host of singers wanting to stay on Dave's good side. Forget the gold standard, base our currency on bass players, the nation's most valuable resource.

After some self indulgent instrumental jamming, the cry went out for the singers to perform. I was on piano and as Dave was busy making sure everyone had enough to eat, I was temporarily in charge on the band stand. After some perfunctory consultation with a line of divas four deep, I went into "(You Make Me Feel Like a) Natural Woman." I have deep roots with that song, I actually first fell in love with composer Carole King's version on Tapestry. Then, older, having acquired a veneer of hipness, I learned about Aretha.

So we went through the song four times, giving each singer a chance to show her stuff. And show it they did, each one digging deep, not holding anything back. "Now I'm no longer doubtful/of what I'm living for," each singer made it to the "You make me feel" part still singing solo, but when the band hit the break for "feel like a natural woman," by some process of group telepathy, every woman in the room joined in, so even though the band dropped out, there was this wall of sound, this wall of female sound, this wall of African American female sound, that rolled right over you. It happened the first time through by good luck, but then for each singer, the crowd duplicated the effect. It was a multi generational party and there were grandmothers, seated in the few valuable seats in the gallery and there were teenagers lounging on the stairs and floor. But when we got to the break, all the females let loose. What power!

Now that I'm in my more mature years I think that I may develop my own voice, now that I've come to admit I'm a baritone, not the high tenor that my early fixation on Neil Young made me try to be for so many years. However on more than a few occasions I've sung a song in a key that in my mind I can sing, but when I try to do it physically, well it's not really happening.

I was playing a gig at the Hebrew Home for the Aged, a set of swing tunes, the music of the inmates' youth in the season of Christmas, when all of us Jews can use a little extra cheer. Some of the women were getting a little rowdy and one of them requested "Fly Me To The Moon," and before I could launch into it, she added the insistent proviso that I must sing it.

Wanting to please, I indulged her, but again I sang it in the key I wished I could sing it in, not the key that my body was made to sing it in. Gamely I played as "hot" a solo as I could muster to try and make up for the squeakiness of the vocal performance and I was gratified at the end of the song by some applause, and also by the pointed extended applause of the woman, a refugee from Brooklyn judging by her accent, who had requested the song. She kept up the solo applause some ten seconds after the rest of the room had fallen silent. Then in the ensuing quiet after she finally stopped clapping, she told me (and the assembled) "That wuz fuh ya playin' not fuh yuh singin'."

Brooklyn! The accent of unvarnished truth.



Memoirs of a Cocktail Pianist: Chapter Four, Gigs

Among my nightmares: I'm driving down Canal Rd near Georgetown in D.C. and I suddenly realize that I'm supposed to be at a gig in Virginia.

Lately it seems that other professions are trying to appropriate the word 'gig,' as in "I got this writing gig," or "I just started this teaching gig." Sorry fellas, but those are 'jobs.' It's easy to tell the difference. Apply this one crucial litmus test question, what do you do there? Is it work? Are you working? If the answer is yes, it's a job. If you are playing music, then it's a gig.

Of course some gigs are more glamorous than others, but all of them have that magical quality: you get paid to play music. Paid to play! Much of the time, you can get paid to play with your friends! It doesn't get much better than that, even when the gig is setting up outside near a bank on Capital Hill to play smooth jazz in the background as the bank gives out free hot dogs, and for sure in most people's minds the hot dogs got top billing. Just like in SpinalTap when the band is humiliated with its second billing underneath, "Puppet Show." I'm sure most people went home and were like, "They had free hot dogs! Oh and free checking for a year. Oh, and yeah there was a band there, but they didn't do any songs I knew." Third billing, with a caveat.

If you want to appreciate all the drama, hopes and dreams that can go into a single gig, see the 1985 movie "The Gig" with Warren Vaché and Cleavon Little.

Being Mr. Precocious, I started playing professional gigs when I was 15. I was a fortunate young man because I had all kinds of people around me helping me. My family playing all kinds of music on the stereo, my Dad playing some piano, and, crucially, friends playing Jazz in junior high school, thanks to the influence of an older brother of one my clique; Charlie Parker in 9th grade, along with Basie head charts ("Shiny Stockings" in the school talent show), my own first love, Elton John and the loves handed down from my older brother and sister, The Beatles, Motown, Laura Nyro. By high school I was chompin' at the bit.

I got gigs, at first, in two ways. In a serious entrepreneurial move I formed a keyboard/drum duo with my good friend (still is, close to four decades later) Clark G--- called "Two Bits." We called one of the big suburban booking agencies, WTA, Washington Talent Agency, one of the founding brothers, Jeff Rubin drove out in his big ass Cadillac to Clark's house, listened to our duo versions of Elton John and tunes from the Louis Armstrong Album "Hello Dolly," and liked us! We had matching patterned polyester shirts which our mothers had purchased for us and soon we had a bunch of gigs playing at 1977 suburban house parties.

Adults cooed over us, we were so cute, plus we played requests. Neither of us drove yet, so we had to have our parents carpool the two of us, Clark's drum set and my Farfisa organ to the gigs. Even then, we used to get \$75 each for a gig. Big money for the day. Even now you'd have to work ten hours at minimum wage just get \$72.50 -- less than \$75 -- plus you'd have those pesky deductions.

I also auditioned and got into a band with a bunch of adults, guys in their 20s and 30s. "Bob Thompson's Cosmic Blues Band." Did I mention this was 1977? I had to take a metro bus to the band leader's house, ride with them to gigs in their converted Milk Truck, crash on his sofa afterwards then take a bus home, or often to high school, the next morning. Amazingly I now live just a few blocks away from that old bus-stop. (I featured that spot here <https://youtu.be/h6tWoU47HzA> in a 12 minutes musical that I filmed all in Takoma Park).

We played some serious dives, but I was a young Sir Galahad, purely turning down offers of alcohol and weed and even on one memorable occasion, sex with a grown woman (no thanks, I don't want to go share a six pack, I'm drinking a Coke!). We played a bunch of bluesy tunes written by Mr. Bob Thompson all of which fit on one "cheat sheet," plus some cover tunes. I can still remember what a thrill it was when we would come to the end of "All Along The Watchtower" and as Bob would sing the line "and the wind, begins to howl," the lead guitar player — a full blown adult, with a handle bar mustache and sideburns — would sneak in with his wah-wah pedal making his guitar tone bring those lyrics to life. I also used to annoy this same guitar player by starting a bunch of my solos out by quoting the Charlie Parker tune "Ornithology." None of the other musicians in the band knew the tune, however John the guitar player, by far the best musician in the band, knew rock, blues and enough Jazz to appreciate how my 16 year old self was butchering bebop.

Our main gig was the hole in the wall in Alexandria called "The Crooked Dart." It was a hippie/redneck place and at the time, the two groups didn't really seem all that different. One night an older redneck guy ended up dancing with a younger hippie girl while her BF was outside doing his thing. When the hippie dude staggered back in -- obviously he wasn't a 'free love' hippie -- he came up behind the older dude and ripped the back panel of his shirt clean off. The guy was left with sleeves on and his bare back exposed. He screamed, waved his arms around and ran out of the club. The young hippie guy and his friends laughed, but shortly the older guy came back with a gun.

I hid behind my keyboard, but I could see the old guy waving his gun around and the hippie and his friends looking concerned. After a bit, the cops came and led the old guy out, no shots fired, and for all I know, no bullets in the gun.

Thankfully, I've left gigs like "The Crooked Dart" behind. On my books right now for the next month are a Jazz Vespers Service, the Takoma Park Street Festival, a gig with a Jazz singer on

Washington's "U" St. and even a gig at a (nice) Jazz club in Alexandria. Since I didn't drive in '75 I don't have a clear picture even of where in Alexandria "The Crooked Dart" was.

But I do have a clear picture of a scenario that has run through my mind again and again. It happens when I'm driving to a gig. I imagine that I'm writing a letter to my two daughters. In the letter I tell them how lucky, heck, let's go with how blessed, I feel I am to be able to actually earn money this way, from gigs. How from the outside it may seem demeaning sometimes, wearing the tuxedo of servitude, playing music for a function, rather than a concert or in a club, but from the inside it's more like a carnival, every tune a different ride.

I would want them to know that I've played *Body and Soul* hundreds of times and still love to play it, not even still trying to get it 'right,' but nailing it, time after time. I'd want them to know that in my mind I sing the lyrics to songs as I play them, but sometimes their names creep in as well, substituting for portions of the original lyrics. I want them to know how happy my life is.

More than two decades ago, as a young father, I played for more than a year with "'Doc' Scantlin and the Imperial Palm Orchestra." What a band! The acoustic bass player had to be able to ALSO play the big white mounted Sousaphone that was set up dead center in the back of the band. 'Doc' is a millionaire now, but at the time he was just a tyrant with a vision and a big repertoire that was rich in 20s and 30s tunes and even went back into the 19-teens. The band was a whole show, full band plus a violinist and cigarette girls dressed in Deco outfits roaming the club.

Every gig would be preceded by Doc issuing us white Carnations to wear on our black Tux jackets. After the last number we were supposed to tear up the carnations and hurl the resultant flowery material at the audience. I always palmed mine, got one from another bandmate and when I got home I'd leave one on each daughters' pillow for them to find when they woke up. Not a bad gig, all in all.



Memoirs of a Cocktail Pianist: Chapter Five, Bands

Among my souvenirs; various band pictures showing me at practically every stage of life, often wearing improbable clothing (and in the more faded pictures, looking absurdly young).

One of the fun things about being a musician, besides doing gigs, is being able to participate in the rich heritage of musician jokes. There are all kinds, and I won't pad these memoirs by repeating my favorites, but I will point out a particular category that I like; jokes predicated on stereotypes of people based on what instrument they play. Piano players are invariably described as know-it-alls which fits me to a tee, and sometimes as insecure, which I don't think fits me. Or does it? Help! I'm not sure...

These stereotypes exist because the different instruments have specific roles which necessitate the development of particular traits: bass players and drummers have to be steady, funky, but steady. Guitarists (seem to) need to develop flashy technique. A singer's got to have attitude, and so on. So what is really fascinating is what happens when a bunch of young people, with these archetypes hovering over them like attendant spirits, assemble and form a band.

If I had come out just a little different, so that instead of being into teaching, playing music and composing, I was into writing seriously about music, then I think I would have gotten a Ph.D in Sociology and would have written about the mid to late 20th century phenomenon of "The Band." When I did my actual Master's thesis on Dizzy Gillespie's approach to improvisation, I got into trouble with the music department thesis committee because the work was cross-disciplinary with Psychology. For my parallel universe dissertation on "Bands," I would have had to go to the Anthropology department and learn about tribal structures, not to mention the Zoology department to learn about group primate behavior. <Insert your favorite Heavy Metal Band Joke here.>

The idea of the "Band" is such a huge presence in American popular culture, that even an offshoot idea, "We're getting the Band back together," is now a well worn cliché. It is often presented with some sort of humorous overtone: when getting back together, the band mates have to be older/fatter/grayer (in the UK, greyer) and, in this scenario often have to have openly renounced their dreams of fame. Their current occupations are held up as comic incongruities with their attempted dream careers as a Rock Stars. Vinny drives a truck, Joe works at the mill, Stan's an accountant...

I think what really ignited both the general fascination with Bands and the specific "getting the Band back together" plot line was that ultimate über band, the Beatles. Like Shakespeare, who consistently comes in 1st on polls of who is the greatest literary figure ever, the Beatles are the undisputed greatest pop band of all time. Google it. When they broke up, a huge demographic of

an entire generation was devastated and many a tabloid newspaper was sold by headlines hinting at a possible Beatles reunion.

<sigh> Ok, I will include just one pertinent joke. *It's 1967 and bebop drummer Max Roach, on the floor outside his dressing room, finds a letter addressed "To The Greatest Drummer in the World." Max, being a modest man, decided that the letter should really go to recent innovator Elvin Jones. He brings the letter to Elvin, however Elvin says thanks, but I think they mean technically greatest, so they both decide the letter should go to Buddy Rich. They find Buddy smoking a joint after a gig and he says, Greatest Drummer in the world? yeah that's me. He rips open the envelope, takes out the letter, and with a sputtering cough shares the salutation, DEAR RINGO...*

It seems fitting that the Beatles should come from England, the birthplace of the industrial revolution. The factory, the assembly line, all these institutions put people together in unnaturally large groups doing tasks which are dictated from on high, which is in sharp contrast to the hunter/gatherer social structure in which homo sapiens spent so many millennia. The BAND became the antithesis of the factory life, a throwback to the tribal stage which was eagerly embraced by many a young person (mostly lads) in the 60s, 70s, maybe not so much in the 80s and again in the 90s.

Being a snooty pianist, I never quite dove into the band thing, but I had friends who did and in my quarter century teaching at a university music department, I saw many a college band being born and then take flight. The quality of these bands plots nicely onto a Bell curve. I remember taking a CD of one band home and playing it for my then teenage punk rocker daughter who reviewed it with the bemused comment, "Wow... it almost doesn't suck..." On the other side of the Bell curve, I recently watched the excellent "Jukebox the Ghost" on the Letterman show, felt seriously good about being every single band members' college piano teacher and also saw my student Angela Aki become the first artist to do a solo show at Tokyo's Budokan — yeah Cheap Trick's Budokan.

The intriguing dynamic is, no matter how good or bad the band is, the band members usually feel, at least some of the time, that they are in the greatest band since the Beatles -- though in my opinion that would have only been The Police, circa 1983. There is even evidence that it is a creative necessity to feel that way. From the other side of the aisle comes confirmation from classical piano virtuoso Claudio Arrau, as well as Jazz pianist/guru Kenny Werner, that right before playing the performer should think, "this is the most beautiful piece/sound in the world." "Suspend the critical faculty" says Arrau.

This makes many bands somewhat militant about their cause. Some years back I was hanging out with some GWU students, one of whom was the bass player in the then-currently most popular band on campus. He was boasting that the band had just gotten a gig at a new club, and as another bass player there digested that information, in a comradely effort to make the first bass player feel relaxed said "Oh that's cool, I've heard worse bands than you guys there." He was

genuinely trying to be reassuring, but I detected that some offense was taken. The band member had suspended the critical faculty so much in connection with his band's music, that his objectivity was in suspended mode.

Because, perforce, these bands turn into mutual admiration societies, it can be particularly traumatic when a band member is ejected. A very good friend was in a band in which all the members lived together (Band Cohabitation, chapter 6 in my parallel universe dissertation). This is a common phenomenon leading to an intensely communal state, food, drugs and sexual partners, all shared ("Switch!" yells the young John Lennon in Hamburg).

My friend's band, like many in the punk movement was, started with the ethic that it didn't really matter how well you played your instrument, in fact too much technical expertise was suspect. But then the Talking Heads injected some funk into the punk and all of a sudden this band's bass player (inhabitant of bedroom #1) was deemed inadequate. He was given the option of remaining in the band as "second keyboard player," but the thought of being on stage with the band and having someone else play bass was too much for him so he was out of the band.

But not out of the apartment, not for a melancholy while. I happened to pay my friend (bedroom #3) a visit at that time and as I crashed in the living area, right outside the erstwhile bass player's bedroom, I could hear it as he sat in his room and threw a hunting knife at his door, Thud!. Then, thud, as he'd retrieve it and throw it again.

What turned the knife in the wound, so to speak, was that this same ex-band member had been the keeper of the band scrapbook, which I found in a pile as I crashed in the living area. I even made an appearance in this scrap book since I had lent my friend my car for one of the band's earlier gigs a fact which was recorded and my name mentioned (Clark's friend, Jim), but only in passing, and dismissively, since I was not a member of the inner circle. I had subbed on keyboards once at The Rat in Kenmore Square, but I was never "in" the band.



Memoirs of a Cocktail Pianist: Chapter Six, A Holy Gig

Among my careers; twenty-two years playing the organ and piano and directing the choir for a wonderful church congregation.

I think an argument can be made that the world's oldest profession is actually cocktail pianist -- though that is the end result of a long process of evolution. In The Beginning it was probably more like Drummer/Vocalist. Of course money hadn't been invented yet, and the concept of musicians' agents was just a gleam in Lucifer's eye, but somewhere, someone was getting fed by the tribe, doing very well in the romance arena, thank you, but didn't have to do much in the way of schlepping. Of course I don't have any concrete evidence of this, but it feels true, in my gut it feels true to me, so it must be true, right?

My first church gig came my way at the improbable stage of college sophomore while at Berklee College of Music in Boston. At the ripe old age of 19 I became the organist/choir director at the First Baptist Church of Cambridge in Central square. It was/is/will be an enormous old building with a huge organ that had the power to make the whole edifice shake when you pulled out the 64' stop. The size of the congregation had dwindled down to about 50 and the choir numbers usually didn't make it into the double digits. It was the first time that I had ever played a organ, like many of its ilk, it had two manual keyboards plus a pedal keyboard with 2 8ves and a 5th. That's right, playing notes with your feet.

After I came back to DC at age 21, I did some freelancing in various area churches. I was playing for an Adventist church pageant performance, and the music/script was in the big binder and as I had to play and turn pages -- a lot of pages, the director gave me this last minute advice, "whatever you do, keep the left hand going, even if you must forsake the right hand." The right hand can wander off into the desert, but keep the left hand with the wagon train.

Shortly after I parted ways with the carnation generating band (see Chap 4.), I stumbled, via a Washington Post ad, onto the best gig I have ever had, organist/choir director at Rockville United Church, in Rockville, MD. They had a job description that included all kinds of things that I wasn't, I hadn't received my degree in church music, I wasn't a trained organist and, in point of fact, I wasn't a Christian. And while I remained Jewish, I did get converted to the idea that people of different faiths should worship together.

The church gig proved to be one of the best learning moves I ever made.

First of all, the choir music library. You've got to hand it to the Christians, they've commissioned/inspired music from the best for some centuries now. Palestrina (1525 -1594), JS Bach

(1685-1750), Handel, that Mozart dude we hear so much about, down to contemporary songsmiths like John Rutter and Bradley Ellingboe. I got to learn all this music, from the dual role of accompanist and director. Even the best variety band out there couldn't hope to rival this stylistic feast.

Second, was the experience of playing the keyboard in worship services. As a cocktail pianist, you evolve to the point where all the time you are playing you are also watching the room. Is that old guy's foot tapping over there? Cool, keep laying on the back beat. Are those well coiffed woman's eyes narrowing in response to me being too loud? Back off. Are there restless kids in the house? Play "Linus and Lucy." Or "Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds" if it's another, older, restless kind of kid.

In the world of church bulletins many church musicians pick a musical selection Thursday night to perform Sunday morning. They show up Sunday with their sheet music and play "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" and if there's been a local shooting that Friday night and the mood would be better served by "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," that might be too bad.

Cocktail pianists operate in a different time frame. At any moment someone could give you a command request. It might be George McGovern asking for "Hey Jude" (see Chap. 1). It might be a silver anniversary couple asking for "The Anniversary Waltz." It might be that high roller on the make who believes with all his heart that the song "My One and Only Love," sensitively played, will earn him the ultimate reward on his first date.

On the other hand, on most cocktail piano gigs, you are very definitely the live equivalent of MUZAK, the Maitre d' will turn you down like you had a knob on your forehead and you must be ready to immediately segue into "Happy Birthday" at a moment's notice and given that a conscientious cocktail pianist will also try to be practicing on the gig, possibly from "Moment's Notice."

So bringing that ability to be spontaneous through playing by ear coupled with, shucks, let me say a certain sensitivity, to a church worship service proved to be a winning strategy. I often played in a [simple lyrical style](#) where I made every note count and I was rewarded with an audience who listened quietly and appreciatively.

I came to see the Blue Presbyterian Hymnal as the first cousin to the REAL BOOK, the Jazz tome from which I first learned a repertoire of Jazz standards. The Hymnal had a few very old songs, Middle Ages, from the days when Knights were bold, but it was filled with Americana, Spirituals, Folk Hymns, songs that it seemed to me resonated with something in my DNA. There were other Hymnals as well, most notably a 1927 edition of a nineteenth century book of transcribed Spirituals from the Hampton Institute, sung by former slaves. Not to mention those Amazing Lyrics by that former slave ship Captain, John Newton. Now we Hymn cognoscenti also relish the fact that the 5th verse was part of the original song, which John Newton "borrowed" (better than borrowing people...) for his repentant lyrics.

When I started the church gig I would often run into problems when I tried to play the hymns on organ. Remember the pedal keyboard? 2 8ves and a 5th of perilous territory that my untrained, size 13 feet were supposed to play. And if you think of the verb "play" in the sense of a game where you score points or miss, then my feet did, in fact, "play" the pedals. If you think of "play" as meaning having a virtuoso command of, then not so much. I never did learn to alternate heel and toe the way a real organist would. But, as the man who was transformed into a newt in Monty Python's Holy Grail said, "Ah got beh'ah." Not much better, but at the same time I learned to not try and play something with my non-dancing feet that they couldn't play.

So I used the sound of the organ to play improvised preludes and sometimes postludes. I could look down at my feet, if needed, and I could make the harmonic rhythm be whatever I wanted it to be. Based on an idea I got from skimming a book on organ improvisation, I based many a postlude on the descending major scale. And God bless Handel for writing all that stuff that is sooo much easier than Bach; you can play Handel by ear in a hot moment.

As I mentioned while I didn't get converted to Christianity, I eventually started to take Communion with these folks. The theology of this church was too beautiful to pass up. While many Catholic churches make Communion into an exclusive club, even denying to share it out to people who are A) openly gay or B) openly Pro-choice or C) have mocked the Pope somehow, RUC had a different policy. I heard these words so many times, "This is not the table of Rockville United Church, or the Presbyterian Church or the UCC, this is the Lord's table..." If RUC hadn't been so wholesome, I might have even had some actual wine, which would have been a nice throwback to my cocktail pianist days, but grape juice was always the order of the day.

Playing music for people who are gathered in an effort to make a connection to the infinite is a wonderful thing. I can sincerely testify to it. If they were alive today both J.S. Bach and Jerry Garcia would back me up on this.



Memoirs of a Cocktail Pianist: Chap Seven, On the Road: Nice & Monaco

Part I.

Dear L---,

I love you!

I can't wait to see you on the Côte d'Azur!!!

xxoo,

J

Dear Neighbor/Landlord,

Our ^{deepest} apologies for our overly boisterous arrival. We were excited to be here to perform in Nice and the set up of the building reminded us of a college dormitory so we behaved without judgement. we will act with decorum from now on.

Yours truly,

The Band

Four weeks left in the long year of public school teaching, on my way to visit a friend in re-hab, I got the phone call from my high school pal Mike. "Doc called from Nice, the gig is on!" Mike's band, The Philadelphia Blues Messengers (a formidable outfit) had taken me along on a whirlwind four day trip Nice and Monaco just 6 months previous and now, at the beginning of my DCPS summer break, the trip would be repeated, but writ large: a full two weeks.

The exact details of the gigs were still a bit hazy on the eve of my departure; Some nights in Monaco at a club where we had "sat in" last December, the promise of gigs for me and the singer at the famous Hotel Negresco and some Irish music gigs for two guys in the band and their wives who all played in Ceili (Irish Party Music) bands. Air fare and lodging all taken care of. Nice, Monaco, the Côte d'Azur." It seemed a no-brainer. Even better, my wife could come and share my lodgings for the one week she could get off of work.

As the sole representative from the DC area, I traveled separately and so arrived at the Côte d'Azur airport before the rest of the band. At that moment I commenced a two week process of trying to think in French by resurrecting my scanty high school knowledge. Reading all the French signage started the vocabulary cauldron bubbling, Sauf = except, Amende = Fine (as in pay a), verbs and conjugations bubbled slowly to the surface. After entering the country without

the formality of having to go through customs (a strike, peut-etre? did I just get lost?), I made my way to the rendezvous point where I saw Doc, his wife and son petit chien, Sparky. Mais pas de The Philadelphia Blues Messengers.

His spidey sense evidently telling him that the band was near, Doc dispatched his wife to lead me to where several cars were waiting to take us to our apartments. This being France, rather than a fleet of Black SUVs, there were three little white cars. The keyboard I brought took up the whole back seat, so Doc's friend, Juliette and I sat in the front and waited for the rest of the band to show up so we could stack some luggage on my keyboard case and maximize efficiency. When we finally saw the weary band plus groupies (spouses) make it's way to the curb, I was determined to welcome them to France properly. Sticking my head out the window, flashing a devil-may-care smirk, I welcomed the band in my new found patois with a hearty "Bonjour, Muh-tha-fuckas!"

It was a testament to my extroverted bonhomie that the remark was taken in the spirit in which it was intended and after the guys cheerfully piled their stuff on my keyboard case, my driver and I started off for the apartments. I had endeavored to elicit the address of our domicile from Doc, but he had held that card close to his chest for some reason. So still hazy about exactly where we would be staying, I was dropped off at a corner with a mountain of stuff while my smiling chauffeur departed to make another run back to le aéroport. On the corner in Nice, local time 13:00, my metabolism telling me that it was 7:00 AM and that I had been up all night and my skin telling me that I was in the Sun. Deux meters a la gauche however there was some shade so after schlepping the stuff over I sat down on my keyboard case and waited...

Later, after we had checked into our three apartments and I looked at a map, I could see that we were ideally situated at 1 Rue Longchamps at the intersection with Rue de la Liberté and one block away from [Place Massena](#), the spectacular center of downtown Nice. While the location proved to be an ideal one, there were other ways in which the arrangements left a bit to be desired.

Some background: The Philadelphia Blues Messengers functioned with a core group of members around which adjunct horn players and keyboard players orbited. It was a configuration which allowed Mike to recruit musicians for certain gigs who would not have committed to the band on a full time basis. The late [Byard Lancaster](#) was one these luminaries and, in fact, it was his connection to Doc that brought us to Nice for our first gig. For this trip the entourage consisted of:

- Mike A. on guitar (avec sa femme Kitty, one of the two Irish Fiddlers)
 - Tom on bass (avec sa femme, Marion the other Irish Fiddler),
 - Sebastian on harp (avec Donna),
 - Pete on drums (solo),
 - moi (avec ma femme Liesel, mais elle, um, oh, flew over a few days later)
- and last, but not least, but added at the last moment,

- Curtis, a 75-year old sax player, fresh out of the hospital with a bad back.
And, of course, the lead singer
- Jocelyn (a bundle of energy who always hit the stage with an instant 110%) and her affable, nattily dressed husband, Mike H.

Total number of people, pre-Liesel arriving = 11.

Total number of beds in the three apartments = 5.

Max number of people sleeping in a bed = 2.

While the math might indicate a remainder of one, none of us single males was down with the idea of sharing a bed with another fellow. The unsatisfactory immediate solution was for Pete and McCoy to sleep on couches. I ended up rating a bed since I had me a spouse on the way.

Knowing the geography of the second floor of 1 Rue Longchamps is critical to an understanding of subsequent events. There were a professional office (avocat = lawyer), an unlabeled suite and two hallways, both accessed by doors which you needed a key to open, with half a dozen apartments each. We had two apartments on one hallway and one on the other. As the 2nd communication above indicated, we celebrated our arrival by running back and forth between each other's rooms, pumping up the tunes, talking excitedly, drinking wine, and blowing smoke out the window. Our party mood was shattered when a stern neighbor stuck his head in the door and enjoined us to be quiet. Slinking back to my apartment, I climbed the metal spiral staircase to the loft area of the apartment and went to sleep in a bed six time zones away from the last bed I had occupied.

Part II.

Pete, sleeping on the couch downstairs, and I were abruptly awakened the next morning by a knock on the door at 9:30 AM (3:30 AM in a sense). It was a terse Doc announcing an emergency meeting in ten minutes in the apartment occupied by Sebastian and Donna (one bed), Tom and Marion (one bed) and Curtis (the couch). Ten minutes later we were all assembled and Doc told us gravely that he had received an email from our landlord that morning. As Sebastian, who had put down a hefty \$1300 dollar deposit, nervously shifted positions next to him, Doc read us the email.

It turned out that the French chap who had quieted us down last night was both our landlord and our neighbor. He lived in the unmarked suite on the very floor where we were staying! He was not happy and he was not hesitant about expressing himself. In the letter he complained of our noise, our not fermez-ing la porte, tabac, seeing McCoy with an unlit cigarette in his mouth plus he was scandalized by how the singer was dressed when he knocked on her door and asked her to be quiet. Doc and Sebastian had in fact just met with him across the hall and received all these complaints again verbally from the man himself. He saved his crowning touch for the live performance, "Theese is not Woodstock," he smirked at us scornfully.

Meanwhile there was trouble brewing around the question of beds versus couches. As they might say in the American South, Doc, bless his heart, probably thought of us as a bunch of teenagers (not too far off, behavior-wise) on tour. Sleeping on a couch, sleeping in the same room as someone else, it's all part of the gig, man. Right? Well several of us (at 54 I was the youngest) had some problems with that. When that dust had settled, Sebastian and Donna left to stay with a nearby friend of Doc's and I was in their room, thus sharing the biggest apartment with Tom (Bass) and Marion (Fiddle-playing spouse). The two Mikes and their spouses shared an apartment, but would have to switch to another apartment next Thursday, no wait next Saturday. Curtis and Pete, much like the unattached males of a bonobo tribe, were at the outskirts in the room across the hall.

So, heartily sick of each other at this point, we fractured for the rest of the day. Tomorrow we would rehearse at 10:00 AM at a nearby club. The next day, July 4th, we would proudly play our American blues music on the beach of Nice in the evening.

Curiously, neither of those last two propositions actually came to pass. The rehearsal did happen, but not at 10:00 AM, although the band, to its credit was at "The Jam" (a nearby club) at 10:00 AM (still a little bit 4:00 AM). The Jam's manager was nowhere to be found and unreachable par le telephone, but just across the pedestrian-only cobbled street was another cafe, where we sucked down espressos and listened to a Blues Messengers CD that someone in the band gave to the cafe owner. By 12:30, the Christoph, the manager of The Jam had been contacted and around 1:00 he arrived, sincerely apologetic for having forgotten. As it turned out, his spirit of apology would serve us well in the near future.

July 4th arrived with two possible storms on the horizon; a high pressure system on the coast bringing intense rain and France playing Germany, who ended up beating them in the World Cup semi finals. It was the rain potential that caused the club on the beach to send their staff home and cancel us, but it took the inventive outlook of Pete to find the silver lining, namely that the French, having lost in the World Cup, might not be in a musically receptive night, so perhaps we lucked out. Mollified, we took the next day off. The night after we would make our triumphant return to Le Brasserie de Monaco.

We had performed an interesting set at the Brasserie de Monaco last December when we came over to play a fun two night stint at the B-Spot, a very well equipped club in Nice. The band actually paid extra to have my trip back pushed back one day because on our 2nd B-Spot night, the owner of the Brasserie de Monaco was there and invited us to come and sit in at his club the following evening. "All the club owners in Monaco are like one big syndicate," we were told by someone, "get in with one of them and you're in with them all." The band playing at his Brasserie would take their last set off and we would take the stage for the last bit of the evening. They had all the equipment we needed. They said.

We were a nine piece band for that tour with two horns and two electric guitars. When we arrived at the club last December, there was a four piece band filling up the modest stage and not a keyboard in sight. After being told at first that there was no keyboard, they finally did come up with a mini two and half octave keyboard with tiny little keys. At first we didn't have a patch chord to plug it into the back of the PA powered speaker, but then someone found one. So we put le petit clavier on a bar table and I played and sometimes filmed. That scene is the last couple minutes of [this seven minute video](#). I will say this, we rocked the place and at the end of our set (pictured at the end of the video) the singer was singing standing on a one of the club's indoor picnic tables, with a lady patron dancing on each side of her.

The club owner was the proximate cause of us being back and this club was our raison d'être, so Doc was taking no chances. He had began hedging his bets some time back by having me bring my own keyboard (steel-lined case just small enough to be checked. The Nord ElectroVoice 2 actually fits into an electric guitar case). Now he was our avant garde having gone over to the club around noon. Mike had a short conversation with him that he relayed to me right after.

Mike: So Doc, do they have a PA? (We were playing outside the club, by the water where there a line of boats docked behind which there was a line of yachts docked).

Doc: Yes, they have a PA

Mike: So, they have drums?

Doc: Yes, they're taking them out of the boxes now.

Mike: So, they have amps?

Doc: What are amps?

Zut alors! The van to take us to Monaco was due in like 20 minutes. Tom was dispatched to run over to The Jam and ask Christoph, the manager if he had any amps we could borrow. Five minutes later Tom called us, Christoph had amps! We could borrow them! Sebastian ran over and they met us at the curb where the vans were waiting with two amps.

The van driver was friendly and chatty and informative. The factoid that stuck with me was this: the most expensive apartment in the world is in Monaco, just purchased for 300,000,000 Euro.

Since groupies had to find their own way there, my wife took the train. As she made her way from the train station to Le Brasserie, Liesel, walking down Monaco's finest shopping street, noticed a display window showing a model Leer Jet and marketing different ways to configure and decorate your very own Leer Jet. Laughing about it with me later, she recalled that at the Côte d'Azur aéroport she saw more Leer Jets than commercial airliners. There were also, of course, Helicopter services to ferry you to your exact final destination.

With all that you'd think the sound set up at the club would be smokin'. You'd be so wrong.

There was a PA.....But there were no monitors.

There was a soundman.....But he really wasn't a soundman, he was a DJ

There were drums.....But the bass drum pedal didn't attach to the bass drum
There were amps!.....They were also being taken out of boxes...

We set up and played our first set. J's American wireless mic was plugged into the PA, Sebastian's classic harp mic was plugged into an amp on the stage. Jocelyn could barely hear herself was not a happy camper at the end of the first set. I noticed an unused powered speaker and I broached the subject with the soundman, whom I'll call DJ.

DJ was a friendly guy who spoke English well enough for us to parley. It took us a while to figure out how to route Jocelyn's signal to the speaker, but we solved that problem and for the rest of that night we played and had fun. We weren't the only ones! The rich aren't like you and me, Holmes. They think nothing of coming up to a band in the middle of a song and starting to talk to the lead singer. An unbelievably drunk woman kept telling us, in typically French accented English, that she was from New Orleans and that she was getting married. She also did a bunch of cartwheels, showing off her red underwear, and she kept flirting with Mike H., Jocelyn's husband. Later I heard another woman complimenting us on our performance and saying "I really need to get you on my ship."

The second night ran along similar lines. It began by Mike and Jocelyn's AC transformer blowing out 1) Jocelyn's wireless mic transmitter and 2) Mike's guitar effect unit. I mean, no big deal, the club had another wireless mic -- DJ ran and got it -- and Mike had enough pedal effects. We play our first set, we play a long second set and get ready to eat our club-provided dinners and go back and play a short last set. It begins to drizzle. No big, we finish eating. It's time to go back, but only Mike, Tom and Sebastian are up there. Pete the drummer and Curtis are still sitting at the table and Jocelyn usually comes up after one of the guys have sung the first song.

I figure this is my big chance and I jump on the drumset and start laying down a beat. The guys playing are psyched and really start to get off when the drizzle turns into a downpour and then all the power/lights shut off. I yell out, "drum solo!" and I go off.

Sadly, those were destined to be my last notes of professional performance on the trip.

At this point we had nine more nights in France and the Philadelphia Ceili Band were playing for the next six. Our penultimate night in France would be July 14, Bastille Day, and somehow the hope was held out that we would get a gig for that night. Maybe if we had possessed inside knowledge of a French blues band that had a Bastille Day gig, we could have kidnapped them and then applied to their booking agent. However we never found someone who wanted to hire us at the last minute for 2,000 Euro. Funny, that. So for me et ma femme there commenced a period of sightseeing that took us to Vence/ St. Paul, Port de Saint Jean and various points within Nice, most spectacularly the Monastère de Cimiez right by the Matisse Museum.

But for Mike A. and Kitty and Tom and Marion there commenced a period of playing 6 nights in a row with the last three nights 33 kilometers away in Cannes. The gigs were in a three-club

chain called Ma Nolan's Irish Pubs, two in Nice, one in Cannes. Of course the first night was not without it's own drama. The band arrived at the Ma Nolan's in Olde Nice (Vieux Nice), as scheduled, only to be told that they were actually supposed to be at the Ma Nolan's in the Port of Nice, a 2 kilometer hustle away. If you want to see the route the band (with instruments) took (by foot), go to google maps and enter these two addresses:

Ma Nolans, 2 Carriera San-Francès-de-Paula, 06300 Nice, France,
Ma Nolans Irish Pub, 5 Quai des Deux Emmanuels, 06300 Nice, France

On the bright side there was a true soundman at the club who set up a PA, avec monitors and took the time to mix. We checked out the band their last night in Vieux Nice and the sound was warm and well balanced.

III.

Alors, pour moi, the rest of the time was divided up into the heavenly period when my wife was still there followed by a period of some five days during which time I married Pete the drummer.

The best outing actually was with both Liesel and Pete when we went to the Cimiez area of Nice to visit the Matisse museum.

I didn't realize that you weren't suppose to take pictures (inadequate warning signage) until I was

about to take my 4th shot.

Oops!
Zut
alors...



Outside le Musée Matisse there were some roman ruins, an arena and next to that was le Parc des Arènes de Cimiez. It was a tribute to American Jazz Musicians. There was a bust of Lionel Hampton and pathways named for Jazz musicians.

To the left, regardez-vous Pete and me standing at the intersection of Alleé Dizzy Gillespie (moi) and Alleé Miles Davis (Pete). There was some steps up to the

Monastery, but Pete and I decided to take a short break under a tree while Liesel walked up the steps. A few minutes later she was back and telling us that we should come up and see what was there. What happened next has to be one of the best ever sequence of events to happen, ever:

- We walk into an awesomely beautiful monastery
- Beautiful music is being played, a violist and a keyboard player.



- They finish their rehearsal and when I ask if I may play one short song they say “Oui!”

- It’s a digital keyboard and he’s switched it from the pipe organ sound he was using to a piano sound. I play Billy Strayhorn’s “The Star Crossed Lovers,” the most beautiful song I know how to play.

- We walk outside to this flower garden.

- We meet a nice woman (in Nice, no less) who tells us some of the history of the place.

Tells us about the Romans,
tells us about the Kingdom of Savoy and tells us that people

lived here circa. 400 BC
tells us if

we walked over...
and
climbed up

the stone steps,
we would be able to
• walk through
their Sacred Grove.



We even got a bonus view of the Roman ruins arena which we had climbed through before.

Meanwhile... back on the Western Front, though all was quiet, there was yet drama a-brewin.’ The two Mikes, Kitty and Jocelyn were put in a room that we did not have booked through the end of their stay and they had to move into a neighboring apartment on Thursday. All packed up and ready to go. Wait! It’s not Thursday that they had to move, silly, it’s Saturday. Oh well, may as well not unpack. Friday (Liesel flies home). Saturday, time to move! Oops, this apartment only has one bed, not two like the previous.

A problem.

And here I am, alone now, in a double bed in my own room.

Not for long!!!

I give up my bed and room, Mike and Kitty move in.

Jocelyn and her Mike get an apartment all to themselves.

Yours truly sleeps on the couch for one night. This happens because I told Sebastian that as a last resort I could sleep on the couch for one night. (Sebastian, I’m sure, hears it as “Jim is going to sleep on the couch tonight”). After that I am booked in a quiet hotel a kilometer away, right next to the Negresco, and half a block from the beach. It is beautiful, but whenever I want to hang with the guys I got to walk a kilometer. Pas mal. It’s a nice walk. For an exiled Bonobo...

The Nice Jazz festival was happening these last few days (just to turn the gig-less knife in the wound) and the B-Spot was hosting late night jam sessions. They were mostly wanting the Festival musicians to come by, but by virtue of our December appearance we got the invite as well. I went by myself one night and heard a very advanced set led by an Italian pianist who was living in Amsterdam. At the beginning of the second set, they called me up to play. While the management knew me, to the band I was just some guy. The guitarist lobs a slow Bb Blues at me and the bass player was no where to be found, so I laid into a slow stride left hand part with the drummer and guitarist. This brought the piano player up to play bass and I evidently passed the audition because they asked me to stay up for a second song with the actual bass player, *All the*

Things You Are (my lucky sitting-in song). Not in 7, haha, I say, just to show I'm hip, but not a monster.

After the second set, I went outside and hung with the piano player and bass player. The bass player was going to college in New Orleans, LA and was just back in Europe for the summer. Again with the New Orleans, connection. Could there be voodoo involved in this trip?

The next night I came back with Mike, who brought his harmonica. This time it was a different, less good group of musicians, and it seemed like a closed shop. But, no lie, we were seated at a table with a couple and the woman leaned over and told me that she had really enjoyed my playing last night (I was wearing my trademark ethnically ambiguous hat so I was readily identifiable) and asked if I going to play again tonight. I smiled and said "we'll see," which seemed to confuse her -- as if I had any control of events... Mike was tired, having just played 6 nights in a row, so we left early, at like 1:45 or so.

Afterwards, it really seemed that "sitting in" is the essence of the whole experience, because the whole time we were, like, "sitting in" not on a bandstand but on another culture, France! A rush of images...

- Posted rules on the buses included Little Dogs Only! Must be why so many people there have these little dogs.
- Learning how to buy produce in the Supermarché -- you weigh it out on these machines in the produce section that give you an icon menu and then print out slips.
- No tipping, service compris.
- TV commercials that include un homme et une femme sitting in a car, the woman unbuttoning her shirt and leaning over the man's lap (BUY THIS CAR, GUYS!!!!).
- TV that is ALL IN FRENCH, no English language at all. *Friends* and *Psych* dubbed.
- A shocking lack of fat people.

I am always looking to be inspired when I travel. This time, chasing inspiration, I decided to read *Moby Dick* for the first time. The first chapter, on the call of the sea, resonated with me, my four cruise ship gigs have only whetted my appetite for more. Call me Impressionable, but I read some significance into an event that happened on the last night I spent in the apartment, the night I slept on the couch. I was about to go to sleep, when all of a sudden there was a drunk young French girl in the apartment. The apartments didn't have numbers on the doors (Pourquoi? Je ne sais pas), so it was easy to get confused. In a flash I was up and I steered her back out into the hallway back toward her apartment and locked the door. Oops Cinderella-like she lost a shoe, un-Prince-like, I unlocked the door and threw the shoe out after her.

Evidently she must have got berated by our resident landlord, because the next morning she knocked on our door and said: Je m'excuse something something. Not excusez-moi, that was maybe too casual for the magnitude of her sin. but Je m'excuse. Trying to approximate how I

wished fate would behave to me I smiled and told her, “pas de problem, je suis Americain!” Hopefully she got my intended implication. Hey I’m American, everything’s cool with us. Right?

Wrong. Leaving Nice, at the airport I was near the front of the line to board. Behind me were two young American males. “I can’t wait to get out of this fucking country” said one. “We should have just stayed in London.” I smiled and felt superior. Then I noticed that I had just smiled and felt superior. Wait... Had I also snorted to myself? Whilst smiling and feeling superior? Zut alors! Maybe, after two weeks of trying to think in French, I had finally succeeded!



Memoirs of a Cocktail Pianist: Chap Eight, The School or “What?!? There are two Eight O’Clocks?”

“Turn left at NPR” was the beginning of this chapter long before I actually got around to the business of writing it. The NPR building with its prominent logo-bearing pillar is at my last big boulevard negotiation as I head down North Capital Street on the way to my job being an Elementary School Music teacher on Capital Hill, Washington, DC. I’ve thought about beginning this chapter enough times that there’s a cute little melody to it. Being a music teacher, I invite you to imagine: |(rest) Mi Do ↓La |Do ReDo Mi | “Turn left at NP-ahR.”



Thanks to an enlightened Principal, I start each day playing the keyboard as the students enter the building. The first year I did that, I played through a bunch of my favorite cocktail piano repertoire, heavily slanted to the kid’s demographic; *Linus and Lucy*, Disney Movie songs (“Let it Go”), Michael Jackson (even today, the most popular artist in the school!) plus songs I felt they should know, mostly from the Folk and Spiritual traditions. The youngsters who were most interested in playing keyboard would pause and watch. Now I barely got a chance to play a song because students would come by for a mini piano lesson, or in many cases to play a quick duet, *Linus and Lucy*, *Mo’ Better Blues* and the ubiquitous, *Mary Had a Little Lamb*. Or to improvise on a group of notes I give them while I play chords underneath. For a few students now, I actually get up and they can play two handed: *Für Elise*, the first AABA section, the intro and groove to *Superstition*, *Beat It*.

Needing to have my keyboard all set up precisely by 8:15 AM for the official door opening connects this job with all the various and sundry gigs I’ve played on land and on sea. It’s always

a matter of needing to be able to start by the minute the contract states. As I set up the keyboard each morning I think about the various times I'd have for gigs on the cruise ship, 4:00 teas, 6:15 poolside cocktail sets, Noontime Captain's lunches for VIP passengers and I am thankful that I am on land teaching music to children. Most days.

In a funny way my 8:15 AM physical set up ends up being a bit like a Piano bar gig I played a few times in Georgetown, where the piano has a table built over it and patrons lounge around it, listen and chat. Thanks to most of my new student-patrons being in the 6-10 year age range, my keyboard on a stand is the perfect height for them to lean on and lounge. The more playful of them will also surreptitiously manipulate the pitch bend wheel on the left side or push the drum beat button — fun times! More to the point, a few more advanced students will help and coach the others. I was impressed when I saw one of the 5th grade students reaching over and correcting someone's wrong notes from behind the keyboard, that is, he was seeing the keyboard upside down, but he could still play the passage correctly.

After that, I realized that the instruction of some of the younger children could be outsourced to this student and I'll sometimes get up and yield the teacher's chair and watch from a few feet away, beaming and occasionally inserting a comment, but mostly being silent. Not only does he coach them on their parts, their fingering, but I've even seen him play chords and encourage a student to improvise. It is fascinating to watch the "drive to mastery" in some of the young players. You see it as they make a beeline to the keyboard and immediately begin their latest conquest, lately it's been the chorus of "Ain't No Mountain High Enough," and the bass line to "My Shot," (from HAMILTON).

What separates the beginners from those on their way to Journeyman status is whether they use two hands. I love the Medieval division of Apprentice/Journeyman/Master. A Journeyman is someone who, in some cases, can fill in for a Master. By that standard I have a few low-level Journeyman students. In addition to the 5th grade teaching student, I have one astonishing young man who began on bass guitar in 3rd grade, then quickly mastered the basics of drums, developed quickly on keyboard, played a bit of guitar and then after over a year of working instrumentally, opened his mouth and proceeded to sing like Michael Jackson. In 5th grade, he made the jump to being able to play piano with [two hands and sing at the same time](#). Despite being born in something like 2006, his favorite band to cover is the 90s group New Edition.

Since our school has a strong Special-Ed program, there are a number of children who arrive on small buses and have to be escorted into the school by the drivers. My first year playing there for a long time I thought that one of the drivers was the Grandfather of one of the students, he just gave off that vibe. In that context I asked him what his favorite song was and consequentially he was treated to *Ribbon in the Sky* every time he came in. He'd stay and even applaud at the end. If that chanced to happen when the Principal was walking by I would imagine my stock rising a few points each time, Ka-ching (IMPACT!) These days I personally don't get that much of a chance to play requests, it's always me working with a student or a student performing. Now, however, there are a couple of lady bus-drivers (hear that, Spirit of Prince?) who are fans of the New Edition-loving 5th grader and will hang out for a few minutes sometimes in hope of him

sitting down and performing *Mr. Telephone Man* or *Cool It Now*. So far, no mic is set up with the keyboard, but that's the next step.

I have already realized one dream, having a keyboard orchestra, which in its first iteration is 9 students divided into three sections: 2 low strings, 2 French Horns and 5 high strings with one on flute but playing the same part as the high strings. Thanks to an active after-school program which has three different dance groups, I was able to have one our pieces choreographed and for the winter concert we performed it, Ballet accompanied by keyboard orchestra. An Elementary School instrumental performance with perfect intonation! If they want to pursue Band or Orchestra instruments later on, they will know what good intonation sounds like.

One of the songs I teach to the 4th grade is *Seasons of Love* from RENT. The sing-along video I made begins with “The equation 60 minutes x 24 (hours) x 365 (days) 525, 600 minutes.” If you don’t know the song you won’t get it. By that same kind of math I once calculated 12 mini-lessons x 4 (days a week, average) x 36 weeks = 1,728 mini lessons a year. That’s a lot of Do Re Mi.

CODA

Originally I wanted this to be 12 chapters long, I had roughed out versions of Chapter 9 - 12.

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| 9) Songs | 10) Dance (playing Dance classes, playing for Broadway Improv) |
| 11) Brushes with fame | 12) The Blues. |

I really liked the idea that chapter 12 would be on the Blues, a form which typically is 12 bars long. Ideas are great right? Actually, Music teaches us that some while some ideas are great, some are not. Even some ideas which in the head are interesting, 12-tone music, for instance, don’t always make for great music. I worked with a guitar player who used the word “idea” mockingly to refer to a musical part someone chose to play which should have just remained in their head. So when I read through my manuscript, it seemed like it flowed all the way through chapter 8, but then it lost momentum. That was when I realized I written a diatonic pop-tune of a book. I had used an 8-note diatonic scale, not a 12-tone chromatic one, which also seems to be a reflection of who I am — *Simple Man, Simple Dreams*.

