

Jammin' On Duane Street

by Daniel Harris

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Shortly after receiving my master's degree from the Yale School of Music, I came down with a serious case of pneumonia. Since I lived alone, they kept me in the hospital for six weeks. I gave all the gigs in my date book to my long-time friend and frequent musical collaborator, Ben Clarone, who was grateful for the work.

Ben and I were boyhood neighbors, musical competitors and friends, sharing the same teachers and training. We frequently worked together, I occasionally played in his groups, and he would play in mine. We often played the same "bread" gigs, as we called the traveling shows, theater productions, jingles and "freelance" orchestra gigs we took when our wallets were thin or we had no other bookings. For Ben, what he craved and where he excelled was improvised music and the fiendishly difficult post-World War II concert music, a niche market, but one where Ben was a super-nova among a small constellation of the finest world-class musicians.

When I was released from the hospital, I hadn't touched a horn in six weeks and was taking daily inhalation therapy as an outpatient. It was a long struggle to get back in shape. Two years previously, I had played *Man of La Mancha* during the tryouts at the Schubert Theater in New Haven. The contractor of musicians at the local Schubert Theater recommended me to the contractor of the traveling company who had telephoned him in a panic looking for a clarinetist who knew the book. The troupe was in Hartford. Being nearly penniless, I took the gig. I went up to Hartford that afternoon, played the show and was hired for the remaining six weeks of the tour.

Since I was very out of shape, I spent the entire tour, practicing, performing the show, or sleeping. By the time the tour was finished and I exited the tour bus in the Port Authority Bus Station in New York City, I was in top condition and flush with cash. But I had no place to stay. I called Ben.

“Ben, this is Dan. I just got off the bus from Dallas. Six weeks with Don Quixote. Can I crash at your crib?”

“Dan, my man? No problem. I'm leaving tomorrow for Europe. I'll be in Darmstadt until November. You can stay at my crib until I get back, or later if you need.”

“Thanks, man. I'll even pay your rent,” I said.

“No need, Gala, is here and she's subbing as associate concert mistress in the New York Phil for the summer, so she's got the rent. Save your *shekels*. Can you find my crib?”

Ben was always generous like this, but I knew Gala would demand I pay my share. I never knew if Ben and Gala were an item, or just friends because they were on the same high musical frequency. Gala was a prodigy on the violin. She was slender and about five feet two inches tall. Ben was six four. The three of us shared a house one year at Yale. Sometimes they slept together, and sometimes not. Most of the time Gala looked awful. She rarely used make-up or combed her waist length hair. She adopted a wild-child look when she gave recitals. She would practice in the living room dressed either in a bra and panties or a huge blue Kimono. She called it her “wine-dark sea” kimono. More than a few times I came home to find her practicing naked. She swore like a sailor while she practiced and always had the metronome going.

“I'm not exactly sure. I don't know the street number.”

“It's 183 Duane Street. Take the downtown number 2 or 3 IRT trains to Chamber Street. Walk up Hudson to Duane. Make a left. It's on your right. When are you going to fall by?”

“Soon, as I can get there.”

“Hop the train, I'll be waiting. The neighborhood is quiet now. It might look deserted, but it's a beehive of creativity behind the walls.”

“I'm on my way.”

There was a sanitation workers' strike and the streets reeked with piled up garbage. I had read that in the upscale buildings, the supers were putting the garbage on the roof. Mayor Lindsay was not having any luck ending that strike or heading off the looming teachers' strike. New York City was starting to accelerate its downward spiral to the looming financial and social disasters of the 70's.

I bought ten fifteen-cent tokens and a Snickers bar from a newsstand near the Times Square subway station. After some of the smaller cities I'd been in during the past six weeks, New York City looked like an aged crippled lady. Yet, when you were on the streets, there was that special New York City vibe of possibility and hope. The rich and the poor mingled. A shabbily dressed black guy was talking to a businessman in an expensive suit. They were watching a three-card Monte game and telling each other where the black queen was, how the guy was palming the cards and using his skill to get the bet price higher. Suddenly the dealer folded up his square of cardboard, took his cards and bolted up Broadway. A cop on a horse pushed his way into the crowd.

“Break it up. Break it up. Don't be a sucker. Keep movin'!”

I kept a tight grip on my clarinet case and with my backpack cinched tightly on my back, I descended into the dark and noisy labyrinth of Times Square Station.

Unless you used the station often, you were never sure where in the station you would be from any given stairway. I arrived at the upper level and looked for signs for the downtown IRT. Somehow I was turned around and found myself standing in front of the Record Mart, the famous emporium of Latin and Jazz records that stood near the Broadway line inside the station. Among the new releases was Astor Piazzolla's, *Maria de Buenos Aires*. I had to buy it for Ben.

The clerk said it arrived that day. Ben and I were both Piazzolla fans. I bought it and added it to my load.

I boarded a downtown number 2 express and exited at Chambers Street. Following Ben's directions I was soon in front of 183 Duane Street. But for a drunk passed out in Ben's doorway, the streets were empty. There were no buzzers, but I could hear Ben tearing up some incredibly fractured avant-garde piece on his bass clarinet. I walked over to West Broadway and called Ben from a pay phone.

"Hey, man. I'm here, but how do I get in?"

"I'll come down and let you in."

I hung up and hotfooted it back to 183. I got there just as Ben was opening the door.

"Lock the door behind you. I should have kicked that wino off the doorstep. It's three flights. There's more company tonight, an old friend."

Each flight was lit by one dim bare bulb. There were no windows. There was a familiar, but strange odor in the building.

"Hey, man, what's that I smell?"

"Dried fruit. The lower two floors are the dried fruit exchange for New York City. It's moving up to Hunt's Point in the Bronx in a couple of months. It's one of the last market exchanges left down here. Across the street it's cabbages and eggs.

Rumor has it they are going to build some huge office towers near here. Taller than the Empire State Building."

"What is this neighborhood?" I asked.

"It's Washington Market, or just Lower Westside. You have to go to Greenwich Village or Chinatown to food shop. But you can play all night, no one will complain. It takes getting used to, but perfect for a musician. There's a guy a few blocks south who rehearses huge drum ensembles half the night. Sometimes when someone opens the door to his place you can hear them up here."

We continued our climb up to the third floor. Ben pushed the door to his place open. It was a big room, the whole floor of the building. The space was more than 75 feet long and probably thirty wide. Someone had installed on a tiled area a stove, refrigerator and a

sink. Behind the kitchen was a curtained off area where there was a shower and a toilet. There were screens around the room that divided areas into sleeping and working spaces. A long bookcase made of wine crates held books, scores and records. There was a Fender-Rhodes piano and a baby grand.

In one corner, Ben had arranged his musical instruments on stands. I had given Ben all my instruments except my b-flat clarinet for safe keeping while I was on tour. Ben owned at least two-dozen woodwinds and with my dozen added to his collection it looked like a 48th Street music store.

Ben gave me the complete tour of the apartment, including showing me where the light switches were and the apartment keys were kept.

“So, Ben, who's the surprise guest?”

“Remember Blue Monday?”

“Blue Monday? Hmm. I remember him. Wasn't he the composer and jazz drummer from Pittsburg who played with Pat Martino and Eric Kloss? He was in Mel Powell's Analysis class with us the first year we were at Yale.”

“Yes, but now you have to think Indian Music. South Indian Carnatic music.”

“What do you mean, Ben?”

“He recently returned from two years in India studying the veena, the South Indian version of the Sitar with some master Carnatic Indian veena player. He's coming here tonight with his Indian wife. They are going to prepare Indian food.”

“I've never eaten Indian food.”

“It's great. You'll love it,” said Ben. “Put your stuff over there. You can sleep on that futon until I split, and then you can use my bed. Make sure you wash the sheets before I get back.”

“Yeah, you know me. I'm pretty tidy.”

“I think I remember one time in New Haven you had your girlfriend and her sister over for a two-day orgy. You borrowed my brand new sheets without telling me and when I returned from a

two-day gig in Philly, they were tossed into the dirty clothes hamper. They were so funky, I had to have them cleaned and burned.”

“Is that true? I think you're making that up.”

“No lie, my friend. But, lets have a drink.”

“I brought a bottle of Jack Daniels and the latest Astor Piazzolla record.”

“Put on the record, I'll pour the drinks. The critics raved about the music.”

We sat there listening to the Pizzaolla and drinking the Jack Daniels.

“Hey, man, did you catch that?” asked Ben singing a nice melody that twined itself around the beat.

“I like that, but did you catch how he used the piano.”

Ben took the tone arm off the record, picked up an alto flute and played the tune he just sang. I grabbed my flute from its case and joined in. We jammed on the tune for a good fifteen minutes.

“Take out your clarinet,” said Ben. “I'll fix another round.”

We jammed the tune again. Ben put the tone arm on another part of the record. We picked up that tune and jammed on it. We had just stopped when Gala came through the door.

“Don't stop on my account,” ordered Gala with a big smile. “Good to see you healthy again, Dan,” giving me a full body hug. Ben tells me we will be roommates this autumn.”

“Well, for a while anyway.”

Gala was dressed in concert dress, a black wraparound floor length skirt over denim cut-offs and a black top. She took off the skirt and changed to a denim work shirt. She slipped her bra off from under the work shirt.

“Ben, let's all three play. What were you playing?” asked Gala.

“Dan brought this new Piazzolla album. We were jamming on this tune.” He put the needle on that selection.

Gala immediately started playing along with the record. Ben and I joined her. When the record went to the next cut, we listened for a moment and then played along. This lasted until the phone rang. Ben answered it.

“Blue Monday is coming up with wife and food,” he said, heading down the stairs.

“Dan, the middle space c on your clarinet is sharp,” scolded Gala, playing the note on her violin.

“Yeah, I know. The horns need some work. I just returned from six weeks with Don Quixote.” I played the c and tuned to her. “That’s a tough note to adjust, especially playing as fast as we were.”

Ben, Blue and his wife Sangeeta entered the apartment. They were carrying three bags of food. I rushed over and took the bag Sangeeta was carrying.

“Blue great to see you! Is this your wife?” I asked.

“Dan, Ben, Gala meet Sangeeta. Sangeeta meet Dan, Ben, Gala.

“You can call me San,” said Sangeeta.

Sangeeta was drop-dead beautiful. She had big dark eyes, mounds of raven-black hair and the classic Tamil hourglass full figure, full bust and hips with a very small waist. It was all packaged in just over five feet. She was dressed in a sari.

Blue and Sangeeta unpacked their groceries and began cooking. Sangeeta never spoke and moved about the kitchen with an efficiency of an experienced cook. It was a pleasure to watch her graceful movements. Blue held forth on curries for a good thirty minutes, all the while Sangeeta assumed the lioness’s share of the meal preparation.

Ben and Gala did not own a dining table, but used an old Con Edison wire spool as a table. We all sat on the floor on cushions and pillows. San shuttled between the kitchen and the table with the various courses. There was a wok on a Sterno stove on the floor next to San, which she used to heat the *nann* bread she had purchased at an Indian restaurant.

I have cherished the memory of that meal since and have sought out Indian restaurants all over the world. San later told me that the best Indian food was to be had in London

Ben, Blue and I were drinking Jack Daniels. Gala and San were sharing a bottle of Mateus.

"Dan and Ben," said Blue, "you should follow the yogi's advice. Drink your solids and chew your liquids. You both wolf your food down like dogs.

"Well, don't make such good food then," quipped Ben.

The dessert consisted of rich honey cakes accompanied by excellent tea.

During the meal we learned that San was the youngest daughter of Blue's veena teacher. Also, that she was an accomplished performer on the veena, violin, mridangam drum and was famous as a singer of Carnatic songs.

Ben was all over San during the meal, flirting, telling tall tales and touching her as often as he could. I asked Blue if he minded, because only I could make Ben stop, having known him so long.

"San can take care of herself. Indian men are worse than Italians when it comes to groping women."

There was a lull after the meal.

"Let's play some music," said Gala.

"What should we play?" asked Blue.

"How about some Beethoven. I have parts for the quartets," said Gala.

"Something slow and pretty," said San.

"How about the *Cavatina* from Beethoven opus 130?"

"Who's going to play what part?" asked Ben.

"I'll play first violin, Dan will play the viola part on clarinet, Ben, you play the cello on bass clarinet and San, can you play second violin?"

"If you have a violin."

"Of course, I have another violin, it's my rainy day outdoor orchestra concert violin, said Gala.

No one seemed to think about Blue, who everyone but San knew solely as a jazz drummer.

After some fiddling with instruments and stands, we began. It didn't sound like a true string quartet, and was a little rough.

"That was fun," said San.

"Play it again," said Blue. "I will improvise a veena part."

Blue spent a good five minutes tuning the veena while Ben and I kissed the Jack Daniels bottle.

San explained the tuning and resonant strings of the veena to Gala.

“OK, I'm ready,” said Blue.

We started the *Cavatina* again. The second time through was much better musically than the first reading. About halfway through, Blue started adding veena notes. His ear was perfect. The veena added a nice international touch and the quality of the veena blended well with the strings and the two clarinets.

When we finished we all looked at each other with smiles of satisfaction.

“Not exactly what Beethoven might have heard, but he was stone deaf when he wrote this, so let's hope that if he heard it somewhere, the sour old kraut was pleased.” said Blue.

“Enough of this nineteenth century classical music,” said Ben. “Let's play some of the new Astor Piazzolla. Ben brought me the latest record. Gala, Dan and I were jamming to it earlier. It was great fun.

Ben put the record on the first cut again.

“Perfect,” said Blue. “My Veena is tuned for this, so let's do it.”

San moved to the baby grand.

We played along with the record. Ben reached over and lifted the tone arm. The rest of the group did a *da capo* and started the tune again. When we reached the end, San started a piano solo that was perfect. Eventually we all joined in. Blue found a plastic bucket and a metal bowl and added percussion. Ben grabbed a soprano sax and played a masterful duet with Gala. I joined in to make it a trio. It was a terrific jam. Nuevo tango meets Hindustani jazz.

“More whisky,” shouted Ben.

“Screw the whiskey,” said Blue. “I've got some great hash.”

A pipe was found, filled and lit. The pipe made a double pass among the group.

“Let's play some jazz,” said San.

I couldn't believe San would suggest that, but she started playing Miles Davis's *Kinda Blue*

Ben grabbed his tenor sax; Gala played the head. We jammed on it for a good fifteen minutes with Ben taking a nice long Trane-like solo. I made an effort at Cannon's solo on Ben's alto. We eventually coalesced into a different jam, but in the same modal style with Blue improvising a great solo on the veena. San accompanied him using the strings of the baby grand as a *mridangam*. *Kinda Blue* evolved into a Carnatic jam with San singing melody lines in Indian *sofège*. Gala joined in with the violin and Ben grabbed a soprano sax and added a *nadhaswaram* [Indian oboe] style sound to the mix. In the heightened awareness of the hash the music seemed to slow down and became three-dimensional. In fact the tempo was double or triple the tempo of *Kinda Blue*.

It was after midnight when San said she had to go. She had a flight that afternoon back to Madras where her mother was on her deathbed. She and Blue packed up the veena, hugs and kisses were exchanged and Ben walked them over to Broadway where they caught a taxi back to Park Slope, Brooklyn.

Gala and I washed the dishes. When Ben returned I poured two nightcaps from the remaining Jack Daniels. Gala began practicing a Prokofiev violin concerto she had to play as soloist with the Concertgebouw Orchestra in September.

Ben and I smoked the ends of the hash and drained the Jack Daniels listening quietly to some incredible Mali kalimba players.

"You know, back in Mali," said Ben, "if a mother's son became a kalimba player, it was like having a son become a drug addict. The son would go into a trance, face a wall and practice for twenty hours at a stretch."

"These recordings are amazing," I said. "I don't know if it's the whiskey or the hash, but for only six notes these guys are amazingly inventive."

"Notice how they use a finger nail to add a buzz to the sound by lightly touching the vibrating metal tongues," explained Ben.

Gala kept practicing the Prokofiev with the metronome ticking away at a furious tempo.

“Ben, I’ve got to get some shut-eye. I’ve been on a bus far too long today.”

“Understood. Take a shower and you can crash on the futon. I have to study some scores for the pieces I have to play in the next few weeks.”

I took a shower and laid down on the futon. Sleep came as I listened to Gala repeating the same six measures over and over and

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