

Cocktail Pianist

by Lee Bloom

It seems the law of gravity will exert its influence even in such mundane matters as afternoon rush hour.

Five Thirty-Two reads the dashboard digital clock. "Damn," he mutters. The gig starts at six o'clock sharp, and today the highways in Northern California seem far more congested than usual. Seven lanes of eastbound vehicles stop and go while they creep toward the tunnel opening. The merging of surface roads onto eastbound route 42 provides momentary relief as the peripheral motion of cars, their drivers haplessly trying to angle into position ahead of the congested masses, slows to an eventual standstill. Earl Walters rarely suffers headaches, but today this pairing of frustrated commuters with the sun's ultraviolet rays beating down on his twenty year-old Toyota is skewing the odds. Spending the next fifteen shady minutes in the claustrophobic but cool, concrete Lafayette Tunnel actually appeals on this August afternoon. As is usually the case upon emerging from the east portal, traffic gradually starts to move — perhaps since at this point the roadway begins a slight descent in elevation.

Maybe he'll make it to the hotel by six, park the car and be set up ready to play on time. In nearly eight years he's not once been late. Looking forward to his four-hour shift playing solo in the lobby he thinks to himself...another ninety bucks for his bimonthly cultural contribution to society. That is, if anyone even bothers to notice that a living, breathing, feeling person sits behind the large instrument — culling acoustic delight from the depths of the keyboard.

Five Fifty-One. Earl is feeling momentum as the trusty hatchback accelerates...twenty-eight, thirty-five, forty-seven miles per hour...when suddenly he slams on the brakes to avoid colliding with the predictably red convertible which has rudely cut him off in the center lane. No fucking signal, of course. And only two weeks since the state of California has officially criminalized this post-modern pastime, he notices with a quick glance that the driver continues to

chirp away — his mobile phone pressed to his preoccupied face, unaware that he nearly caused a serious traffic accident. "Jerk!"

Multi-tasking has become the norm, he ruminates in an effort to calm down. People today are so highly distractible, melded with their personal electronic devices and conditioned to process more and more information more rapidly and therefore, it seems, more superficially. "Cultural Attention-Deficit-Disorder," he chuckles.

Does anybody still care about songs?

In less than five minutes, Earl will transition from the chaos of the rush-hour commute into the hotel parking garage, and finally upstairs to the familiar keyboard of the Kawai grand piano. And into the familiar world of his music. He feels relieved that his perfect attendance record remains untarnished as he closes and locks the car door, swinging his backpack full of music over his left shoulder. He whistles a catchy Erroll Garner melody which echoes off the poured concrete frame of the garage.

Five Fifty-Eight. "Hey Earl, how ya doin'?" asks the bartender, handing him an empty 8-ounce bar glass with a bright pewter key at its bottom. "Not bad...but crazy traffic today!" he replies. After turning off the recorded muzak which permeates the hotel sound system, Earl opens the locked piano and folds two crisp bills into the glass, which he then places on the instrument's lid. Taking a deep breath, he runs his fingers up and down the keyboard while absorbing the rich sound which resonates inside the spacious lobby. Finding himself in the key of F, he begins to outline the melody of Jerome Kern's *I'm Old Fashioned*. He eventually settles on a medium tempo and improvises several choruses before modulating down a whole-step in order to restate the theme anew. The key of E-flat now suggests to him *Gone With The Wind*, into which he segues seamlessly.

By this point, Earl has thoroughly scanned the scantily populated room; the bartender busies himself by alternately wiping down the granite bar-top or restocking his alcohol. Rita the forty-something server checks the supply of domestic cheese, crackers and assorted vegetables as two businessmen sit at the bar discussing the Major

League Baseball highlights which are flashing overhead on the large screen TV. They hardly seem aware of the music which surrounds them, nor that it is being spontaneously played by a real pianist just a few feet away.

Not that this poses a particular problem for Earl. He is, in fact, so accustomed to functioning as background music that he can be thrown off guard on those rare occasions when people request a favorite song or seem genuinely engaged with his piano playing.

After years working this job he feels he has mastered the twin goals of enlivening and enhancing the lobby environment for hotel guests with his elegant playing while simultaneously managing to keep his own musical mind stimulated. Life as a self-employed musician, supplanted by 15 or so hours a week of teaching piano to private students doesn't leave too much time for daily practice. This gig, he figures, sustains the opportunity to refine his keyboard skills and to bone up on his repertoire. So what if people don't really pay attention or barely appreciate his music; Earl is essentially getting paid to practice. Over the course of an evening he might bolster his familiarity with a particular tune by playing it from memory in three different keys. Or he might polish his sight reading skills by working through a Bach Invention or a Chopin Nocturne. And after all, if he doesn't execute the piece perfectly who will notice?

A recording session is scheduled to happen in less than three weeks. Earl has decided to invest his own capital in order to perform and document his original compositions. After much consideration, he has assembled a group of respected peers to participate in the project. So today Earl has brought several lead sheets of these compositions, at varying levels of completion, to play in the lobby. He hopes to spend some time today getting the melodies solidly under his fingers to better prepare himself for the recording. The practical challenge of accruing enough paying work makes it difficult for him to prioritize this recording session — which will eventually cost several thousand dollars — solely for the artistic satisfaction of concretizing his own compositions and his own

arrangements. Yet Earl has fully committed himself to finally realizing this personal goal, hopefully within the next year.

Seven Twenty-Five. Here's a lively family reunion coalescing at the large round table. Lots of kids snacking on french fries and sodas. People are usually so detached from the music. Indeed, they might only be subliminally aware that the texture of a grand piano fills the hall. Once in a while they'll recognize a familiar tune.

Nine Fifteen. Earl knows how to go through the motions. He smiles, hoping to make a momentary connection with a customer. As he mechanically tags the ending of *Satin Doll* a striking female figure brushes by the treble end of the keyboard, awakening Earl from a lull. He suddenly sits upright. She seats herself at a small table about 20 feet from the piano. She is tall, slender and her smooth black hair falls gently over her olive cheek. Her lips are a timeless shade of red. In all his years at this hotel, he's never seen a woman so stunning. She must be Mediterranean or South American he surmises. After placing her drink order she glances back to acknowledge Earl and as he voices the opening chord of *Sophisticated Lady* he notices that she actually seems attentive to his music. She smiles upon recognizing Duke Ellington's melodic masterpiece. Earl takes note of her body swaying to the beat and begins slowly undressing her in his mind, all the while maintaining a steady musical pulse.

Suddenly his concentration is broken with the appearance of a young boy of six or seven who stands near the piano observing his hands with keen interest. Earl acknowledges the child with a smile and while continuing to play asks him if he studies the piano. "No, but my sister does, and my parents say I can too, but not 'til next year," the boy replies. At this moment, the striking woman gets up from her table, approaches the piano and places a folded bill into the tip glass. Earl is still engaged with the boy so barely gets a closer glimpse of her face and eyes before she makes the short walk back to her seat, missing an obvious opportunity to make small talk with her. Damn it. Twenty dollars sure is a generous gesture, though!

Brazil, Argentina, or perhaps Sicily he muses to himself, surveying her facial features with great care. Earl notices that his own pulse has increased with the excitement of playing for this beauty who has stirred his imagination. He tracks her body language but tries to not be too obvious. She seems to smile at certain cadence points in the music; just now for instance as he completes the bridge. Is she traveling alone? Wonder if she's staying in the penthouse suite? Should he take his break in ten minutes and try to strike up a conversation with her? How would she respond? Perhaps she is the daughter of a wealthy diplomat. Is she a musician herself? He imagines her to be someone who grew up appreciating jazz. If she loves music, she's bound to be interested in Earl. His mind fills with fantasies of seduction, imagining this dark beauty enticing him upstairs to her room. He envisions his fingers caressing not the keyboard but instead stroking her delicate skin and ebony hair.

Earl finishes a second Ellington number and decides that it is now time to share his own original composition with his sublime listener. He unequivocally chooses a romantic waltz, as yet untitled, in the key of C-sharp minor.

His focus on the melody is exquisite. He pours his soul into each phrase and eventually reaches the climactic final interlude of the composition, wherein he improvises freely over a steady minor chord. From his vantage point, he can observe only the right side of her body, but he notices her profile lightly pulsing with his groove. He feels a surge of adrenaline, certain that he has succeeded in making a connection with her through his music. Now she moves her upper torso in a swaying motion, and her warm smile gives him a feeling of ecstasy. His fingers tingle.

He extends the final chord lavishly over the full range of the piano and is determined to approach her, introduce himself and, finally — devour the sound of her voice. While he lifts his body off the piano bench, she turns toward him so he can at last view the entirety of her face. A small earpiece rests almost invisibly on her left temple

and she speaks into an even tinier mouthpiece, giggling aloud as she shares one last joke.

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