

# My Back Pages 33

Rich Lynch



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articles and essays by Rich Lynch

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If ever a year ever desperately needed a reset, this is the one. There has been one outrage after another as the current resident of the White House has demonstrated many times over that he's not only unfit to be President, he's also by all appearances unfit to be anywhere outside a padded room. Or maybe even a prison cell. And that's all I'll say about that – anything more will get my blood pressure up and I don't want to do that because I'm already on heart meds.

So instead, I'll use this issue for essays that mostly relate (in some way) to the turn-of-year holiday season we're now in the midst of. Last time I did that was back in 2023 for *MBP* 29 when I led off the issue by describing what's absolutely, positively my all-time favorite Christmas song – Darlene Love's "Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)". This time I'll start with a short essay about what's my *second*-favorite Christmas song. And it's a good one!

*Rich Lynch*  
*Gaithersburg, Maryland*  
*December 2025*

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*My Back Pages* has a companion letterzine: *You're Still on My Mind*.

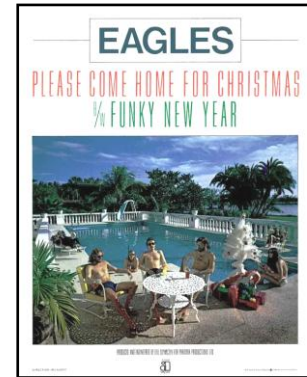
All issues of both zines are archived at [efanzines.com](http://efanzines.com) and [fanac.org](http://fanac.org)

# I've Got the Blues for Christmas

For the past several years, Nicki and I have been listening to a lot of blues music. And by “a lot” I mean A LOT. It’s a terrific genre, so rich in both its history and its many sub-variants. There are not only really good Blues music podcasts that some very dedicated enthusiasts are producing at frequent intervals, there are even some weekly radio broadcasts that play a couple of hours of the stuff. The two we’ve been streaming via their websites are Paul Shugrue’s at WHRO in Virginia and Matthew Socey’s at WFYI in Indiana. Matthew, in particular, has become almost like an old friend and our Saturday evenings would be a bit empty without him.

I don’t really think I could pick out a blues song that I could call my favorite. I’m just grateful that there have been so many good ones. But since this is the holiday season, there’s one in particular that stands out. And even though, as you read in this issue’s opening remarks, it’s not my favorite Christmas song it does come in a pretty close second. It’s Eagles’ cover of “Please Come Home for Christmas”.

It was composed in 1960 by pianist and songwriter Tony Russell “Charles” Brown. Eagles recorded it in 1978 and released it as a stand-alone single for that year’s holiday season. It made it into the *Billboard* Hot 100, peaking at #18, making it the first Christmas song to crack the Top 20 since the early 1960s. What makes it great in my opinion is the combination of Don Henley’s vocals and Don Felder’s bluesy guitar. In particular, the choice of Henley over Glenn Frey for lead vocal was the right one as Henley has a little bit of raspiness in his voice Frey didn’t have, and it fits in really well with bluesy nature of the song. It’s one of their very best recordings, and it’s a bit surprising that it was never included on any album until their 2003 “Best of” double album.



Eagles were a superb band before Glenn Frey’s death in 2016. And, for that matter, still are, as Vince Gill has been a really good replacement for Frey. I’ve read that they’re starting a residency at The Sphere in Las Vegas that will run through most of 2026, and I’ve also seen a recent video on YouTube that shows “Please Come Home for Christmas” is part of their set list for December shows. As it should be.

There have been many, many other covers of the song besides the one by Eagles – more than 230 of them according to [secondhandsongs.com](http://secondhandsongs.com) by singers as disparate as B.B. King, Kelly Clarkson, Fats Domino, Dion, Cher, Cheap Trick, Willie Nelson, Jon Bon Jovi, and (believe it or not) Mel Gibson. There have been versions done in the style of country, punk, zydeco, doo wop, jazz, and a few that seem unclassifiable. It’s just a great song that stays great no matter how it’s performed. But it’s especially great if the group singing it is Eagles.

So yeah, I look forward to hearing the song pretty often during the holiday season. There’s no doubt about it – I’ve got the blues for Christmas. ☀

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## Afterword:

I wish Ken Burns would make a documentary series about blues music. I really enjoyed the recent one he did about country music. And, as you’ll read next, I also liked the one he did way back in 2001 about another very popular musical genre.

# All That Jazz

Well, it's finally the new millennium, but it sure seems a lot like the old one to me. The Washington traffic seems as bad as ever, the tourists still seem pretty clueless, and we've got the same crappy February weather, with all the mist and rain, as last year. The one thing we didn't have was all the hoopla and fireworks celebrations at the end of the year, like there was at the end of 1999. The beginning of the actual first year of the new millennium, like Rodney Dangerfield, just "don't get no respect".

One thing that was different for this past January from the previous year was a new television miniseries on PBS from Ken Burns. This one, about the history of jazz music, was one a pretty good production – not quite as good as *The Civil War* but much better than his disappointing *Baseball*. There was much to like about *Jazz*, and I came away with a better understanding how American music evolved throughout the 20th Century, from syncopated ragtime to swing music to bebop and beyond. And there were many interesting personal histories told in the series – the stories of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington were the threads that held the series together, but many slightly less prominent musicians, like Charlie Parker, Bix Beiderbecke, and Miles Davis, also were featured in various episodes.



Most of the critics seemed to like the series, too, from what I've read, though many of them with some reservations. The one complaint that I think is probably justified against the series is of its limited view, mostly onto what was considered the 'mainstream' of jazz, if there was such a thing. Or more specifically, the 'mainstream' as perceived by Wynton Marsalis and some of the other musicians and music critics who appeared in the series to provide modern-day perspectives. There was little mention, for instance, of the Latino influences, or Latino musicians and bandleaders, or the types of jazz that evolved from non-American origins. There was also essentially zero mention of many of the variants of jazz such as New Orleans Dixieland, for instance – Al Hirt and Pete Fountain might as well have not existed, because their names weren't mentioned even once. And other musicians (such as Glenn Miller) were given lip service, or appeared briefly, and for others (such as Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey) there was no real closure on how their careers progressed or ended.

Still, for what it was, I think the series was mostly a success, and I'm sure Burns believes he hit the mark he was shooting for. There were many entertaining anecdotal stories and also some tragic ones. I've always thought that one of the purposes of a history, whether written or a media production like *Jazz*, is for preservation – don't let the memories fade away. If you look at it from that viewpoint, *Jazz* was a success. It will be about three more years until Ken Burns' next production, the life and times of Mark Twain. I'll be looking forward to it. ☀

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## Afterword:

Louis Armstrong had a large presence in *Jazz* but he had an even larger presence on Broadway this past January. He was the subject of a jukebox musical about his life titled *A Wonderful World*, one of the six shows Nicki and I took in during our annual mini-vacation in New York. As you'll read, it turned out to be a very chilly four days in the city.

# Give My Regards to Broadway

**“Where’s the rest of the suite??”**

I’d wondered that aloud to Nicki upon entering our hotel room. We’d just arrived in New York on our annual early January mini-vacation, and were trying out a new place to stay – the SpringHill Suites on West 46<sup>th</sup> Street, just a half block west of Times Square. It’s probably the newest hotel in close proximity to the Square – it’s only been open for less than a year – and the reason we chose to stay there (apart from its location) was the room rate. We’d have much preferred to stay at the nearby Marriott Marquis, where we’d been for our 2024 trip, but since then it had become very expensive – even with my Marriott Platinum status and our eligibility for the Seniors rate it would have been north of \$400 a night to be there. Approaching \$500, actually, once you added in the various taxes and that annoying Resort Fee. A total non-starter. So it was really unexpected to find that we could stay at the SpringHill Suites for about \$185 per night, including all taxes (and there weren’t any add-on fees). A Marriott property with a rate that low, that close to Times Square? It had seemed almost too good to be true. Until we discovered the room size.

It was small. Really compact, especially for two people. The Queen-size bed took up close to half of the available space and the adjoining bathroom was tiny – both of us couldn’t be in there at once. But whoever did the room design did a good job – once we figured out the best places to put the suitcases and their contents, it all started to make some sense. We didn’t have a lot of room available for us and our stuff, but it was enough.

All this compactness had been necessary, we’d observed, because the hotel didn’t have a very wide frontage on 46<sup>th</sup> Street – only about 60 feet or so. There were 21 floors above the lobby, with just eight rooms per floor arranged in a semicircle of sorts around the two elevators. Kind of amazing, actually, that a hotel with fewer than 100 rooms could have a workable business plan that allowed for rooms so affordable.

It wasn’t quite amazing, but we did think it was a pleasant surprise that the hotel went so far out of its way to provide things like a really good breakfast buffet down in the sub-lobby and complimentary hot chocolate in the lobby. We decided we were starting to like this place!

But speaking of surprises, the most unexpected one was the show put on by two other hotel guests – and they weren’t even staying at SpringHill. A much larger hotel, the Edison, is next to the SpringHill and there is about a 50-foot air gap between its tower and the one for the SpringHill. It was close enough that we could see that the Edison’s rooms were larger, and in one of them were a young couple who were snogging.



the two snoggers



our view of the nearby Edison Hotel

Well, it didn't really rise to the level of an 'R' rating but it still looked pretty hot'n'heavy to me. Nicki waved her arms at them to let them know they were being observed and they must have seen that through their window. But they kept at it. We lowered our window shade and left them to their own devices, but just before we did I blurted out, "Geez, they should get a room! Oh wait..." Nicki just smiled and rolled her eyes.

**"I think we got the worst show of the trip out of the way first."**

That was my comment after we'd seen a very uneven staging of the musical *Sunset Blvd.* There had been a lot of possibilities for us to pick from all the shows listed at the discount TKTS ticket booth, but we'd chosen this one because of all the positive comments we'd heard while in line for tickets and from all the accolades and awards it had received in its 2023 West End run in London. And to a certain extent, they had been deserved – the acting was really good (especially by Mandy Gonzalez, who subbed for Nicole Scherzinger that evening), as were the songs whose music had been composed by Andrew Lloyd Webber. But there was no stage design whatsoever. Instead, there was a very large super hi-def movie screen which quickly became, in effect, a member of the cast.

I can understand why the producers made that choice – it was their homage to the classic 1950 Billy Wilder movie the musical is adapted from. And it's a really faithful adaptation. *Sunset Blvd.* is the story, set in 1949, of the aging and mentally unbalanced actress Norma Desmond, desperately trying to revive her career with the help of an up-an-coming screenwriter, Joe Gillis, who ends up becoming her 'kept man'. It's all very noir and the producers must have decided that it would be interesting to blur the line between a stage musical and a movie, hence the screen. But Nicki and I had been down that 'big screen' road before – during our 2020 trip we'd gone to a truly dismal staging of *West Side Story* which had also used a large video screen in place of production values. At north of \$140 per person it had been, as I'd described it, the most expensive movie tickets we'd ever purchased.

This latest incarnation of *Sunset Blvd.* wasn't nearly as disappointing as that, thankfully, because for one thing, the video technology was much, much better – it was so incredibly hi-def that you could see tiny wrinkles on Miss Desmond's face. Which I guess might have been the intent. And partially movie-fying the show via that large screen allowed them to do a couple of things that were somewhat innovative – there were opening and closing credit scrolls, and at the beginning of the second act Tom Francis, the actor playing Joe Gillis, took us on a backstage tour of the theatre and then went out for a short stroll around 44<sup>th</sup> Street before returning inside, striding down a theatre aisle past the audience and onto the stage. All the while singing the title song of the musical. It's always going to be what I remember most about the show.

I have no doubt this version of the musical is going to be nominated for and will possibly win one or more Tony Awards. But Nicki and I were still let down by it – previous stagings of *Sunset Blvd.*, including the original one from 1993 with the great Patti LuPone in the cast, had



outside the St. James Theatre on Jan. 7<sup>th</sup>

featured lush production values which had made it seem like the viewer had been transported back in time. This one could have, too, and it would have made the show much, much better. But from the way the audience reacted, I guess that's a minority opinion. Two guys sitting next to us that evening had also attended three previous performances, and they both considered it the best musical currently on Broadway. Nicki and I, however, beg to differ.

### **“I never knew Zachary Quinto could play the banjo.”**

There was more blurring the line for the next show we saw, but this time it was between a play and a musical. It was *Cult of Love*, about a Christmas Eve gathering of the Dahl family at the parents' home in suburban Connecticut. It opened with a group sing, in really good multipart harmony, with family members accompanying themselves with piano, guitar, tambourine, sleigh bells, and, yes, the banjo. Which led to my whispered comment to Nicki.

The cast included other celebrity actors besides Quinto. Mare Winningham (from *St. Elmo's Fire* and many other movies) played the increasingly-stressed mother and David Rasche (you might remember him as the title character in the offbeat *Sledge Hammer!* 1980s TV series) played the early-stages-of-dementia father.

Quinto's character was one of their grown children (he was a lawyer who had also attended divinity school), with Rebecca Henderson (from the *Russian Doll* TV series), Shailene Woodley (from the *Divergent* series of movies),

and Christopher Sears (various TV roles) playing the others: a married lesbian (who brought her wife to the reunion), a mentally-ill minister's wife who hears voices and interprets them as messages from God, and a former child chess prodigy who grew up to be a drug addict.

It all starts out pretty innocuously, with much joy and love on display between family members, but pretty soon cracks in the façade begin to appear and it eventually becomes a struggle for everyone to just to hold it all together. The title of the show implies that a family can be and often is a 'cult of love', and it seemed pretty clear that was the case for the Dahls. The parents had showered affection on their children as they were growing up, but they'd also had pretty firm ideas about what their children's lives should be. And that included singing – lots and lots of singing, as if they were a latter-day American analog of the Trapp Family.

I was impressed by how good it was. They were very polished and professional-sounding – so much so that there could reasonably have been a cast album. The songs seemed to be the glue that was fragilely holding the Dahl family together as pent-up angers of various sorts began to emerge while the night went on. This all makes the play seem a bit superficial and predictable, I know, but there really was a lot of depth in all the characters as they each dealt (or tried to) with their own personal demons. Even Quinto's character, from appearances the sanest of the bunch, seemed on the verge of despair from all the dysfunction he was seeing.

Was there a happy ending? Kind of. In the end, love did win out and hard feelings were mostly put aside. There was even a show-closing family sing, though the choice seemed a bit curious to me: the traditional folk song “Shenandoah”. It's not about Christmas and it's certainly



the Hayes Theatre marquee

not about New England. But it did contain the lyrics “*I long to hear you, Far away ... Just to be near you, Far away, far away...*” which seem at least somewhat apropos. But whatever. *Cult of Love* was an interesting portrayal of family dynamics, and we both liked it. Seeing it was good use of a very chilly afternoon.

**“This is awful!”**

That was my comment to Nicki, many times during the trip, when we were out on the streets of New York. Very cold afternoons and evenings were the norm. An ever-present icy wind tried to cut right through us, and there were some streets (including 46<sup>th</sup> Street, outside our hotel) where it felt like we were in the middle of an arctic gale. It had been several years since we’d experienced such subfreezing conditions in New York. So we never strayed very far from Times Square.



one of the Times Square street performers

Still, there were interesting sights to be seen on nearby streets and avenue. One of them was right there in Times Square, where street performers didn’t seem to be much affected by the cold weather. Performance art buskers take over parts of the Square fairly frequently, and they’re usually entertaining enough that people will stand around watching them, even at the risk of becoming human popsicles.



the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree

plenty of spectators, including ourselves, but what we’d really come for was a couple blocks farther on – the Lego Store.

The farthest we got from Times Square was only about eight blocks. Last January there were lots of remnants of the holiday season to be seen, but this year the only Christmasy thing we came across was the large Rockefeller Center tree. There were a lot of people in the plaza where the tree was located, but they seemed mostly to be there because of the nearby skating rink. Dozens of skaters in all ranges of expertise were gliding around on the ice, with more awaiting their turns. There were also



the Rockefeller Center ice rink

Nicki and I had wanted to see it on last year’s trip but the store has an occupancy limit and there had been a long line of people waiting to get in, Maybe it was because the timing of our trip (due to how New Year’s Day fell on the calendar, we’d come to New York five days later in

January than last year) or maybe it was because of all the cold weather, but this year it was a lot different – there wasn't any waiting line at all.

Used to be that the Lego Store was in a building that fronted the plaza, but a few years ago it moved to a bigger space over on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. In its previous location it had lots of whimsical Lego constructs, including a large dragon that entwined itself throughout the store, even seeming to emerge from the outside wall and balefully glare at all the



the Lego big yellow taxi

goings-on in the plaza. Nothing quite like that to be seen in the new store but there were still lots of expert-level Lego builds on display for us to marvel at, including a taxi cab that was large



me and hopefully my new best buddy

enough for people to sit in. I think even Joni Mitchell would be impressed. The most marvelous builds of all were actually 'Marvel'ous builds, and there were a lot of them – Captain America, Iron Man, Thor...and hopefully my new best buddy, The Hulk. From the looks of him, he wasn't in a very good mood. But hey, it's not easy being green!

None of the Lego constructs were signed, so I don't know who the builders were. But there was a non-Lego statue over on Broadway whose provenance *is* known – Danish sculptor Bjorn Skaarup's *Hippo*

*Ballerina*. The description that I found online states that it's 15-feet tall, though my photograph of it with Nicki makes it seem shorter than that. The beast was inspired by the Degas sculpture *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* and, of course, the dancing hippos in *Fantasia*. It was originally part of a gathering of whimsical Skaarup sculptures collectively titled *Bronze Creatures Great and Small* which was on exhibition for too short a time (i.e., between two of our New York trips) back in 2017 at a gallery on West 57<sup>th</sup> Street. Wish we'd seen it. Instead, I'll just note that one of Nicki's favorite holiday songs is "I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas" and even though it was a couple weeks late, I think she got one.



Nicki and Hippo Ballerina

## Wait, what??

That was my thought when I overheard one of the TKTS ticket vendors mentioning to another customer that the January 8<sup>th</sup> performances of *Death Becomes Her* had been canceled due to illnesses in the cast. It was fortuitous that we'd been within earshot because the previous day we'd bought tix for this day's matinee. But we coped. For this trip it seemed like we were constantly in scramble mode for getting tickets to shows we wanted to see, so when we got to the head of the TKTS queue we always made sure we had not only a Plan B but Plans C & D as well.

It turned out that we never did get to see *Death Becomes Her*. All the rebookings for shows that were canceled made good tickets impossible to find at a reasonable price. That's how we ended going to *Cult of Love* instead. But we would have anyway. We already knew we'd wanted to see it; it just turned out to be a little sooner than we'd planned.



outside the Lyric Theatre on January 8<sup>th</sup>

In all we saw six shows in four days, tying a personal record for our New York trips. One of them was *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, a play that absolutely required the attendee to be familiar with what went on in the various Harry Potter books and movies in order to make sense of it all. The play centers around Harry's son Albus, and takes place about two decades after the events of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Anything further I could say about it would be perilously close to spoilers, but I'll still mention that a major plot point revolves around time travel into the past to try and save friends and loved ones. And as we know, that rarely ever ends well.

As for the production and staging, we'd expected it to be superior on all counts and it was. The great Arthur C. Clarke wrote that "any sufficiently advanced technology is

indistinguishable from magic" and this show was a case in point. Harry Potter exists in a universe where magic is pervasive, so the stage show had to depict magic in a way which makes you almost believe it's real. And it did. Some of it was so good that it was Penn-and-Teller-worthy. The show's *Playbill* credits Jamie Harrison for creating all the amazing illusions. A bit of online research informs me that he's "a master magician, theater director, and renowned artistic director" and for the Potter musical he'd said: "I didn't want it to feel like CGI or special effects – I want it to feel organic, like we're working with real objects in the real world." He really succeeded – what I saw on stage looked absolutely convincing. It was a good show.

Actually, they were *all* good shows except for *Sunset Boulevard*, and even that one had redeeming qualities. I don't know if I could single out one that I liked best, but I do know that one we'd been looking forward to see, *A Wonderful World – The Louis Armstrong Musical*, lived up to our elevated expectations. This was one of those so-called 'jukebox' musicals – the ones that don't have songs specifically written for them. Don't know if 'jukebox' is the right way to describe it, though, because just about all of the music in the show had been written and were popular well before jukeboxes were even a thing.

The show was a depiction of Armstrong's life, from his beginnings as a professional musician on a New Orleans riverboat in the 1910s to his time in Chicago in the '20s where he became famous, and then out to Hollywood in the '30s where he appeared in movies and other filmed productions, and finally to New York in the '40s (as a means of evading organized crime's attempts to take over his career)

where he found a good agent "who knew some guys" and that took the pressure off. Along the way, Armstrong was married four times, always to strong women who influenced his career for the better. The three divorces were mostly because he'd had wanderlust in him to seek his fortune in other places while they did not, though the wife in California had somewhat facilitated Armstrong's move to New York by running off with his band's drummer.

But we'd come to the show for the music as much as the story, and there was a lot of it – 29 songs and orchestra pieces in all – everything from New Orleans standards like "Basin Street Blues" to Armstrong's only Billboard #1 hit, "Hello, Dolly!". And, of course, the title song "What a Wonderful World" which brought the show to a close. I really liked Armstrong's brand of popular songs and hot jazz. It was a pleasant reprieve from a cold afternoon.

### **"I think we were meant to see this show."**

I said that to Nicki after we'd gotten our tickets to *Left on Tenth* on the final evening of the trip. It had been our Plan C for the evening, but Plans A (*Death Becomes Her*) and B (*Maybe Happy Ending*) didn't work out. *Death Becomes Her* had been a kind of a doomed hope-against-hope situation but we'd been within about 15 seconds of getting tickets for the futuristic *Maybe Happy Ending*, a musical about two lifelike 'helper' robots who fall in love with each other. There had been two really good seats available, from what the TKTS vender had told us, but they'd been snapped up in the brief time between when he'd located the seats and then tried to print out the tickets. If we'd asked about *Maybe Happy Ending* first, we'd have gotten those tickets.

But that was actually okay with me – if we'd had one more day in New York we'd have wanted to see *Left on Tenth* anyway. It's a stage adaptation of Delia Ephron's memoir of the same title, about how she recovered from the grief of losing both her sister (playwright Nora)



outside the Studio 54 Theatre on January 9<sup>th</sup>

and husband to cancer, found a new love in an old acquaintance she hadn't seen in decades, and then fought a fierce and eventually winning battle against an aggressive form of leukemia. What put it on our shortlist for shows of interest were the two lead actors – Juliana Margulies (of *The Good Wife* and *The Hot Zone*) and Peter Gallagher (who played the neurodegenerative disease-stricken father in *Zoe's Extraordinary Playlist* and a CIA Division Director in *Covert Affairs*). They're both favorites of ours.



But it was the supporting cast, Peter Francis James and Kate MacCluggage, who showed the most breadth in their acting abilities. There were probably more than a dozen different characters they played, which required many quick changes in both costumes and mannerisms. The overall format of the show was interesting, with the two leads frequently breaking the fourth wall to act as narrators. We'd seen that done before, back in 2020, for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and it's an effective way to provide information to the audience while still moving the plot of the play forward. Since the show was based on a memoir, it's not really a spoiler to say that things do become satisfactorily resolved and that there is an emotionally gratifying ending. I'm glad we got to see it.



the set of *Eureka Day*

Three of the six shows we saw were single-act, about 100 minutes start-to-finish, and they were all plays. Two of them were *Cult of Love* (absolutely not a comedy) and *Left on Main* (somewhat comedic at times). The other was *Eureka Day*, which was more comedic yet. It's a story about the governing council of a 'free independent school' (the Eureka Day School in Berkeley, California), after one of the students there becomes infected with mumps.

This kind of school apparently came into existence about a half century ago as a means of providing a different kind of approach to learning – the schools let parents choose their children's elementary education path and the children are allowed to learn at their own pace. The play consists of a series of governing council meetings that take place over several weeks. The Eureka Day School had been shut down to prevent the spread of mumps, and the main plot point was the disagreement among the council members on whether or not to require vaccinations for mumps and other diseases before allowing the children to return to classes. In one of the meetings there was a Zoom session for parents and it turned out they were as divided on the issue as the council. It started relatively innocuously but it didn't take long for snide remarks to appear in the chat section, and after that it all went outrageously and hilariously off the rails.

As for the governing council disagreement, one of the members was an anti-vaxer. She had lost her toddler to what she'd assumed was a bad reaction to the measles/mumps/rubella vaccine,

and refused to accept that the child had actually died from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. The contrast between comedy and tragedy created a bit of an emotional rollercoaster, for me at least, and the way the board was finally able to reach consensus to require vaccines seemed inevitable and provided a satisfying ending.

After the show there was an on-stage cast interview and we stuck around for that. I was hoping to get a bit more insight about how this kind of play resonated with the actors but they seemed more interested in telling anecdotes about things that happened during rehearsals, in particular the staging of that over-the-top Zoom session. The format didn't allow for questions from the audience so I didn't get to ask Amber Gray (whose



on-stage cast interview after the show

presence in the cast was one of the reasons we wanted to see the show) about how she prepared for a role like this as opposed to the one she had in *Hadestown* (where she played Persephone, the Queen of the Underworld). I'm sure she would have had a response that was both interesting and entertaining.

### **“I think I’m ready to go home.”**

I said that to Nicki on the way back to our hotel room from *Left on Tenth*. All of the shows we saw were interesting and entertaining, but six of them in four days was a lot. And even though they didn't exactly wear us down I think there was enough overall sensory overload that we were ready for the train trip back to Maryland the next day.

We'd started these yearly mini-vacation to New York, my goodness, 17 years ago, and all but the first one have been in January. I hope next year the weather will kind enough that we can do more in terms of visiting more of the city's attractions – there are many that, even after all these years, we've still not gotten to see. Some are outdoorsy enough that we'll need to make a warm weather trip, and maybe this will finally be the year for that. But for now we'll give our regards to Broadway. We'll be back again ere long. ☀

### **Afterword:**

Nicki and I have already been planning our next trip to New York, though we won't know which shows we'll be seeing until we get there. But there have been plenty of really good shows to see here in the D.C. area. Since the beginning of last December we've seen plays or musicals at six different theatres in D.C. and two out here in Maryland, running the gamut from light comedy to dark tragedy. One of the most interesting was at the Shakespeare Theatre last December, where they had on stage the great Patrick Page in a one-man show about “How Shakespeare Invented the Villain”. It was definitely a case of the dark side being really entertaining.



# An Evening with Patrick

The end of the year has been interesting for Nicki and me, in terms of theatre-going. We've had five shows on our calendar, four of them related to the holiday season. The one that wasn't was maybe the most special – The Shakespeare Theatre's production of *All the Devils Are Here*, an impressive one-man show that walked us through William Shakespeare's career as a playwright and described in illuminating detail "How Shakespeare Invented the Villain".

What made it most special of all was the actor who both created and performed the play – the great Patrick Page. Most of us casual theatrophiles are probably familiar with him for his roles in musical theatre, specifically *Hadestown* (where he portrayed Hades himself) and *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* (where he was The Green Goblin). But his first love is Shakespearean drama, and that was made ever so clear in his one-man show.

The structure of the show was Page immersing himself into various notorious and nefarious characters from some of Shakespeare's most well-known plays to orate samplings of those characters. And then coming back to the present so that he could describe the motivations of not only those characters



publicity photo of the *Hamlet* part of the performance

but also of Shakespeare himself. One of the things he pointed out to us was that Shakespeare evolved as a playwright, especially in the depictions of his villains. For example, in one of his earliest plays, *Titus Andronicus*, Aaron the Moor was pretty much as motivationally dark as a character can possibly be, existing only for vengeance and more than willing to lead others to do evil. But then came the plague, and with it a two-year stretch away from theatres that allowed Shakespeare to turn to other pursuits such as love sonnets. When normalcy returned he had become a changed man, and it showed in the characters in his plays – they were far more nuanced, with some 'good' characters having less-than-desirable traits and 'bad' characters sometimes prone to soul-searching to find a way forward.

The evening proved to be a master class literary history lesson, though I think it might be an overstatement to claim that Shakespeare 'invented' the villain – his contemporary Kit Marlowe also wrote some pretty bad guys into his plays and the two of them had a lot in common in terms of their writing styles. But Marlowe died when Shakespeare was still honing his craft, and so it



was The Bard who wrote the book, so to say, on theatrical villainry and how it gets portrayed. Patrick Page did a very skillful job in showing how such portrayals changed over Shakespeare's writing career. This was exemplified by Page's examination of Shakespeare's final play, *The Tempest*, which featured a main character, Prospero, who initially had much evil and a thirst for revenge in his heart but then relented, becoming less hardened and much more humanistic.



Nicki has a photo op of sorts with Patrick after the show

asked had more to do with the overall breadth of his talent as an actor – I noted that a lot of his Shakespearean side appeared to also be present in his *Hadestown* role, so I wondered what goes into deciding the kinds of roles of interest. But his answer delved more into the pragmatic aspects of being an actor – a good role was a good role.

The evening ended with a bit of levity – after a long and somewhat convoluted response to a woman's query, he wondered if he had answered her question. She responded that she wasn't sure, but it was very entertaining listening to him. That got a laugh from the audience and it sent us all on our way. Well, for now, anyway – I'm very much looking forward to seeing him on stage again. ☀

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## Afterword:

Nicki and I do more on our trips to New York and Washington than just take in theatre shows. We also like museums and there are many of them to see in both cities. One of our favorites is The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which seems to always have several interesting exhibitions of art and the ancient world. Our most recent visit there was back at the beginning of 2023 where the main attraction was a special exhibit about what ancient sculptures would look like if we could see them in their original painted forms. But it was in the modern art section of the museum that I found something of particular interest: two large oils by Salvador Dalí, which I found greatly in contrast to his much, much smaller painting *The Persistence of Memory* over at MoMA. I liked them both so much that I decided to write an essay about Señor Dalí and some of his artwork. As you'll read next, it was from a very personal point of view.

# Encounters with Señor Dalí

There's an art museum down in St. Petersburg, Florida that I may never get to see. It's relatively new as museums go, having opened at the beginning of 2011 in replacement of an older structure whose exterior had the look of a repurposed electronics mega-mart. The newer museum, from the photos I've seen, is much different in appearance – it's more than a bit surrealistic in design, inspired no doubt by the famous artist whose works are now on display there. And that would be the one and only, Salvador Dalí.



publicity photo of The Dalí Museum

The museum reportedly has the second-largest collection of Dalí works in the world – only the Dalí Theatre and Museum in Figueres, Spain has more. The Florida museum's collection includes (according to Wikipedia) “96 oil paintings, over 100 watercolors and drawings, 1,300 graphics, photographs, sculptures, and *objets d'art*.” But not the most famous Dalí work of all: *The Persistence of Memory*. That one is in New York at The Museum of Modern Art. And it's really small!

We've all seen photos of it – it's the one with the melting clocks. Dalí finished it in 1931, during a time when he was (according to Wikipedia) “deliberately inducing psychotic hallucinations to inspire his art”. An anonymous donor gave it to MoMA just a few years after that and it's been one of the museum's star attractions ever since. The painting measures only 13 inches wide by 10 inches tall, but on a per-square-inch basis it's the most popular work of art on display. MoMA allows non-flash photography, and the day I was there (a decade or so ago) I witnessed a rugby scrum of people scrambling to position themselves for their personal keepsake photos. I found it entertaining, in a perverse way, to watch them jockey about to get a few seconds in front of the painting. So *my* keepsake photo was actually a meta-photograph of another camera-toting museum visitor during his brief prime time front-and-center. The moment seemed as Zen-like as the painting. I'd like to think Dalí would have agreed.



my meta-photo of *The Persistence of Memory*

MoMA is not the only NYC museum with a famous Dalí painting. There's another one at The Metropolitan Museum of Art titled *Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercubus)* that's a surrealistic depiction of the crucifixion of Jesus – instead of a cross, the body of Christ is affixed to an unfolded tesseract. And whereas *The Persistence of Memory* is diminutive in size, this one is quite large – it's about six feet tall by four feet wide. The Met's website states that: “Dalí

utilized his theory of ‘nuclear mysticism’, a fusion of Catholicism, mathematics and science, to create this unusual interpretation of Christ’s crucifixion. Levitating before a hypercube – a geometric, multidimensional form – Christ’s body is healthy, athletic, and bears no signs of torture.” I found that, in its own way, *Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercubus)* was just as compelling as *The Persistence of Memory*. The only difference was that there were far, far fewer people as an audience on the day I was there.

Besides these, there was one other Dalí encounter I’ve experienced. And boy, was it ever memorable! Back in 1999, during a free evening on a business trip to Slovakia, I almost got myself thrown out of a *Salvador Dalí in Bratislava* exhibition. It was in a gallery of a downtown museum, and most of the display consisted of small bronze sculptures mounted in free-standing glass pedestal cases.

But there was also a collection (around the walls of the room) of signed and numbered artist prints of various subjects, many of them more than a bit bizarre. There were exactly 100 of these prints, and as I walked through the exhibition I noticed that every one of them was numbered 1 of 111. I had been leaning over, looking more closely at one, when I noticed I was blocking access for an older lady. I’m generally quite apologetic in such situations, so I quickly straightened up and took one step backward, turning away to move on... and my shoulder smacked hard into one of those free-standing glass cases.



Nicki and *Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercubus)*

The thing came very close to toppling over – it rocked once and wobbled quite a bit, but it remained standing. Two of the museum attendants, who had been passively seated nearby, nearly jumped out of their skins – they leaped to their feet with looks of sheer horror on their faces. After everything settled down they had a brief, hushed conversation and then took their seats again, but I noticed that my actions were being very closely observed the rest of the time I was there.

I regret that I never got a chance to meet Señor Dalí in person. But there was never really a chance to do that – he lived in the United States for a while after WWII but moved back to his home country Spain the year before I was born. And he died over there the year before my first European trip. So admiring some of his *objets d’art* is the best I’ve been able to do. Maybe someday I’ll make it down to Florida to see the Dalí Museum. If that ever happens I’ll ask about all those numbered artist prints. And I’ll be sure to steer clear of any free-standing glass display cases! ☀

## Afterword:

As I mentioned in the essay, I never got to meet Salvador Dalí. If I had I’m pretty sure it would have been memorable, to say the very least. But I feel blessed that I have met and befriended many other memorable people. One of them was Esther Cole, who has a prominent place in the history of 1950s science fiction fandom. Here’s my remembrance of her.

# Farewell, Dear Lady

There was sad news today. I found out that a dear friend for more than 30 years had passed.

Esther Cole had been a science fiction fan for a lot longer than I had known her – more than 80 years, in fact. She had met her husband Lester in 1944, and from the way she'd described it he had pretty much swept her off her feet:

*“Les came a-wooning with a copy of *The Black Flame*. In it, the protagonist wears a gown of Alexandrites, so when Les told me Alexandrites sold for \$10,000 a carat and promised to drape me in them, my answer was YES YES YES YES YES (exactly like Sally to Harry).”*

Lester and Esther Cole were members of that famous West Coast fan club, The Elves', Gnomes' and Little Men's Science Fiction, Chowder, and Marching Society which in the 1950s had several claims to fame, the most notable of which being an *actual* claim for a tract of land on the moon. It had resulted in mainstream news coverage around the world. A bit later in the decade they were the host organization for the 1954 World Science Fiction Convention (held in San Francisco), and that had been the conduit for my first contact with Les and Es.

It was back in 1991, when I'd been doing some background research for a new edition of Harry Warner, Jr.'s 1950s fan history book *A Wealth of Fable*, that I'd contacted them to gather additional information about the 1954 Worldcon for which Les had been co-chair and Esther the treasurer. It was two years later, at the 1993 Worldcon (also in San Francisco), that I got to meet them – they had attended to participate in discussion panels about fandom from that fabulous decade of the 1950s. I was moderator for the panel about the '54 Worldcon and I remember that it was both informative and very entertaining.



Esther and Lester Cole  
at the 1954 Worldcon

It was the beginning of a terrific friendship with the Coles, and following the convention Nicki and I persuaded them to contribute essays to our fanzine *Mimosa*. The first of Es's appeared in the 16<sup>th</sup> issue, in December 1994, and described the half century that she and Les had been fans. It was titled, appropriately, “I Married a Science Fiction” and evoked a comment from another fanzine publisher that this was the kind of article he would want to build an issue around. After that there were three more by her that we published: “Stalking the Vampire”, about how an invasive bat (which may or may not have been Count Dracula) had disrupted things in the Little Men's suite at the 1952 Chicago Worldcon hotel; “The Gods of Rushmore”, about how the return trip to California from the 1952 Worldcon had included a brief side trip into the Twilight Zone; and (in our final issue) “Hot Watermelon”, about another epic Worldcon road trip, this time from Oakland to New Orleans for the 1951 Nolacon. Good reads all of them, and each one filled with history about that golden era of fandom.

Nicki and I visited the Coles several times at their home in Ventura after that memorable 1993 Worldcon, the final time in the summer of 2018 on our way up the California coast to

Worldcon 76. When it came time to plan for the trip we had many options, in terms of places to go and things to do, before we ended up in San Jose. But every one of them included a stopover in Ventura. Les and Es were both in their nineties and even though neither they nor we wanted to acknowledge it, we all knew it might well be the last time we'd see each other.

It turned out that Les had not been not feeling well and had just returned home from a short stay in the hospital, but Es was as buoyant as we'd remembered her from our previous visit a dozen years earlier. We sat around the dining room table with her, bringing back some of the memories from the past quarter century of our friendship and telling her about some of what was going on in current-day fandom. Time passed too quickly, and then it was time to go.



Nicki and Es during our 2018 visit

We never saw them again. Les's health continued to deteriorate and he died about a year after our visit. And, just today, I learned of Es's passing. She had moved to an assisted living community in Ventura about a year after Les died and this past year had reached her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. She'd stopped answering emails and surface mail a few years ago, and every December since then we'd sent her a holiday greeting card hoping that it would not come back to us. But this year it did.

I called the assisted living community and asked about her, and that's how I learned that she had died. The woman I talked to told me that it had happened less than a month ago. And that she'd had a peaceful existence in her years there.

So here I am today, looking at that returned holiday card and remembering some of the visits that Nicki and I had made over the years to see her and Les. The card had come back with the usual "Return to Sender" ink stamp, but it also had something that, while true, was unintentionally amusing: "Unable to Forward". Pretty sure Es, wherever her spirit may be, is chuckling about that. Farewell, dear lady. I'm missing you. ☀

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### Afterword:

Nicki and I are now to the point in our lives where just about every year we lose people we know to age-related maladies. The most recent was our friend Guy Lillian, and I'll have a remembrance of him in the next issue of *MBP*. There was a wake of sorts for Guy at this year's DeepSouthCon down in New Orleans (which we attended) and there will be another next year at the Los Angeles Worldcon. And we'll be there for that as well.

But there have been many late fan friends where the only memorials have been in the pages of fanzines, and I suspect this next one may be a case in point. It was almost unbelievable to me that someone twelve years younger than I am could die in his sleep, but living more than an ocean away I don't know the exact circumstances. But I *do* know that it was a privilege to have met him and have had him as my friend.

# Piotr

I learned about his death from a short two-line obit in the December issue of *Ansible*:

*Piotr 'Raku' Rak (1962-2023), noted Polish fanzine editor, con-goer and club/award organizer who won special Eurocon awards in 1991 and 1993, died on 2 November aged 61.*

To me, the fandom I know is maybe a bit like an ornate tapestry – filled with colorful memories about events I've participated in and people I'd met and come to know over the years. And every time one of those people passes it creates a tear in that fabric. That's definitely the case with Piotr.

He was not the first Polish fan I ever met – that distinction goes to Andrzej Kowalski, who at that time was his supervisor. Most of my professional career had been as an International Activities Advisor at the U.S. Department of Energy and way back in 1992, Andrzej had been part of a visiting Polish delegation of energy experts that I had chaperoned to meetings at several technology demonstration sites in the United States. We were out in the middle of Kentucky, almost a week into the trip, before I discovered he was an avid science fiction reader and fan. And it had probably been a similar revelation for Andrzej to discover that I was, too.

I met Piotr the following year on my first of many trips to Poland. Andrzej had assigned Piotr as my liaison when I visited their energy institute in Katowice. He had evidently informed Piotr of my interests in science fiction and that I was a fan because it was what our first extended conversation was mostly about. Things were in transition, during that first ten years following the fall of communism, and I was fortunate that there had been sufficient interest from the U.S. Government, in terms of getting greater knowledge of Poland's energy sector, that I was able to find funding to go there about once or twice a year through the end of the 1990s and very beginning of the 2000s. Whenever I traveled to Poland, Katowice and its energy institute was usually part of my itinerary. And my point of contact there was always Piotr.

We became friends very quickly. Science fiction and its fandom was a common denominator, of course, but it went beyond that. He took time away from his family to make sure everything was okay during my stays in Katowice and that included setting up a dinner with him and others in his local fandom whenever I was in town. They were bonding experiences, fueled by good food and good beer. It was at one of these dinners I met the prominent Polish fan and translator Piotr Cholewa, and we all found we had yet more of common interest – 1970s and 1980s rock music. I told them in more detail than was probably necessary about a fabulous Springsteen concert I'd attended in Tennessee and got back a similar amount about a Jethro Tull concert at Katowice's big flying saucer-shaped sports arena. It went on from there – it was a musical geekfest.



Piotr Rak and the Katowice sports arena

The time Piotr went the most out of his way to help me was on the first day of my May 2000 trip. Just as the train to Katowice was about to depart the Warsaw Central Station, two guys jostled me while I was struggling to get settled in the railcar compartment and got away with my wallet. All my credit cards were in that wallet, including my ATM card. It could have been a financial disaster. But Piotr met me at the Katowice train station and he immediately provided unlimited use of his mobile phone to call back to the United States to cancel the stolen credit cards, arrange for replacements, and get some cash wired to me. He also vouched for me at the hotel so I could check in without a credit card. And he even treated me to dinner at one of Katowice's many pleasant sidewalk restaurants. He absolutely saved my trip.

I didn't know it then, but that was the last time I'd ever see him. He wasn't at my meeting the next day with the institute's upper management and when that concluded I was whisked away to the Katowice station for a train ride back to Warsaw. We kept in touch by email and I'd planned to go back there the next year, in the autumn, but then 9-11 happened and all international travel was put on hiatus. By the time that had lifted my funding had dried up and I had been reassigned to another group where my travels took me to other places in the world. I did eventually make it back to Poland, but not anywhere near Katowice.

And now he's gone. What I have left to remember him by are a few photos I'd taken of him all those years ago. But up in my headspace he's still alive and probably always will be. Oh, and there's one more thing. Even though he wasn't at that next day's meeting he'd made sure I was given a replacement for the wallet that had been stolen – a much nicer one than what I'd had. I still have it. And I make use of it whenever I'm on the road. Like me, it's starting to show its age but I'm not going to discard it. It's a reminder of all the good times. ☀

## Afterword:

I checked and I don't have very many photos of Piotr. And I'm especially disappointed that I don't have one of the two of us together. Another memory I have of him is when, on a chilly and snowy mid-December evening in Katowice, he brought me to a huge indoor shopping mart – one of the first shopping malls in Poland. It had been built by French investors who named it 'Géant', and I found it an accurate description of the place. It was huge, especially the major anchor store that looked like it was bigger than the largest Wal-Mart or K-Mart or supermart of any kind I'd ever been to. At that time, anyway. I remember that Piotr seemed amused at how awestruck I was, and seeing the photo of him that I took in the mall brought all that back to me. Hey, every picture tells a story.



Piotr at the 'Géant' shopping mall in Katowice

Poland plays a minor, peripheral role in this next essay. Back in 2001, not long after the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, a different kind of threat emerged for U.S. Government workers – biological attack. Reacting to that caused a lot of disruption.

# The Holiday Season that Keeps on Giving

I received something in my office mail today (in mid-March) that was, at the same time, both surprising and unsurprising. It was a Christmas Card from one of my business contacts in Poland that, from the postmark, was originally mailed back in mid-December. It's a really nice one, with a wintry village scene set upon a old-time map of Poland and lots of gold-metallic highlighting to make the 'village' seem like there's a fire in every fireplace.

So I was amused to discover that the holiday season is apparently still not quite over. But it's not really surprising for me to receive holiday cards at work well after the turn of the new year. All the incoming mail at work now bears the stamp "Sanitized", this in response to the Anthrax-laden mail attack of October 2001 that killed two postal workers and shut down the largest mail-processing facility here in D.C. I'm not really sure what they do to 'sanitize' our mail – it involves some kind of heating process designed to kill any Anthrax spores that, as a side effect, also leaves the envelopes so brittle that they flake away when you open them. And it also causes a delay in delivery, sometimes by more than a month – at first, right after the attack, all mail deliveries were stopped and we were told to do all our business by telephone, fax, and email. It was nearly three months before office mail service was restored.

Most of what was in that first batch of mail after delivery resumed was junk, but there *were* a few gems – invitations to several Embassy holiday parties. (Tarnished gems, actually, because those parties, unbeknownst to me, had of course already happened.) And there was also the card from Poland.

If anything, the Anthrax attacks have moved us toward the so-called 'paperless office', though I doubt we'll ever truly get there – computers and networks aren't fast enough yet, and we keep getting prodded to reduce the amount of online storage in our email directories. (Mine is *huge*.) As for the Embassies, most have gotten the word (and not just from me) to inform us of their activities by email. But I hope we never reach the point where *all* holiday cards are sent that way – hey, there are still some things that are too nice to appear on a computer screen! ☀

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## Afterword:

Another of the casualties of the sanitizing process was a classical music CD that one of my overseas business contacts in Slovakia had sent me. It arrived a few days after the Polish Christmas Card and when I peeled open the mailer I found that the CD case had been partly melted and the CD itself badly warped. I'd always brought some classical CDs with me on my trips to Slovakia to give to people in the organization that was hosting me, and they usually reciprocated by sending me, as a Christmas present, a CD of a Slovak orchestra recording.

This is a roundabout way of moving on to the next essay, which returns to the topic of jazz. Or more precisely, an exploration of sorts about the boundary where jazz meets classical.



# The Borderland of Jazz

Because of the *Jazz* miniseries, I think it might be interesting to explore a bit of the border between jazz and classical music. Even though you can't usually tell by listening, jazz musicians fall into two categories – those that can read music and had some musical education in their backgrounds, and those that play by 'feel' or by 'ear' and who couldn't play (or compose) a musical score to save their lives. I think there are probably more of the former than the latter, even given that jazz is very improvisational by its very nature and often doesn't use or require written music. And there are jazz musicians who would have been famous (or more famous, at least) as classical music artists if their careers hadn't been so overshadowed by their fame in swing music or other types of jazz.

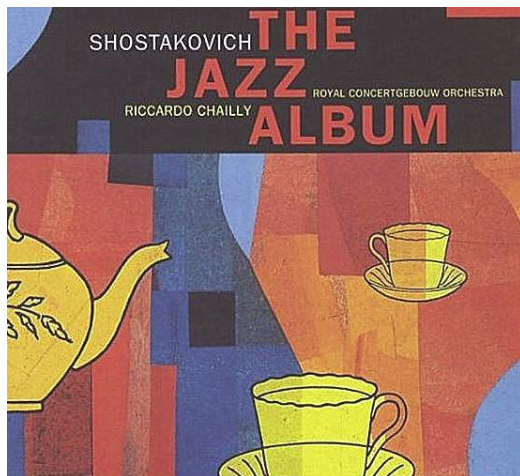
One of these is the great Benny Goodman, who toward the end of his prime had largely abandoned swing for classical. There are several Benny Goodman classical CDs available that would make good additions to a classical music collection, perhaps the best one being his *Mozart at Tanglewood* album (BMG Classics 09026-68804-2), recorded at the 1956 Berkshire Music Festival. Goodman apparently had a liking for classical music even when he was in his prime as a big band swing musician in the 1930s – during one of his radio broadcasts in 1937 included one of the movements of Mozart's Clarinet Quintet (i.e., a string quartet plus clarinet). That same composition is on this disk, featuring Goodman and members of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The other piece on this disk is Mozart's Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra, one of the most wonderful classical music compositions of all time. It's been often said that Mozart could write music that would make angels weep; this concerto is proof of that.



Wynton Marsalis is another jazz-classical crossover musician. Nowadays he mostly performs with the Lincoln Center Jazz Band, but he has such awesome talent that he might be the greatest classical music trumpet player of all time – he's that good. I'm actually kind of embarrassed that I have only one 'Classic Wynton' album, which is in fact titled *Classic Wynton* (Sony Classical SK 60804). This is one of those 'Best of' albums (we got it as a premium for our yearly membership to WETA); normally I steer away from that kind of compilation because it usually includes bits & pieces and isolated movements, rather than complete compositions. There's some of that here, too, but the upside is that instead of only two or three compositions on the disk, there are twenty, and they are all quite good. Some of these are very recognizable, like the *Fanfare-Rondeau* by Jean-Joseph Mouret that was used as intro music

by the PBS series *Masterpiece Theater*, while others impress you by their complexity and the degree of technical competence required to play them correctly. An example of the latter is a true variations-on-a-theme composition, Jean-Baptiste Arban's *Variations on Le Carnival de Venise* for trumpet and orchestra, which gets my vote as the most difficult-to-play piece of written music ever composed – it starts out as a simple melody, *The Carnival of Venice* and by repetition evolves into ever more intricate variations. The final one is so amazing that you say to yourself after hearing it, “There’s no way he could play that!” It’s a rite-of-passage piece for the serious trumpet player; when you can master that, you’re ready for the big time. This, I think, is the definitive recording of the piece, and Marsalis makes it seem easy.

The borderland between jazz and classical is more than just a few very talented musicians, though. There are some compositions that could rightfully be classified as either. I’ve mentioned some of these in previous essays – Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* and *An American in Paris*, and the piano rags of Scott Joplin. None of those date later than the 1920s, though, when jazz was still fairly young. Since then there have been some deliberate efforts by classical music composers to bridge the gap, though many of these, to tell the truth, are not very listenable. One exception is the Russian composer, Dmitri Shostakovich. I mentioned earlier that one of the deficiencies of Ken Burns’ *Jazz* was that it mostly ignored anything that was going on outside the United States. By the 1930s, the ‘swing music’ form of jazz had become popular worldwide, and there were local variants that came into existence in even seemingly unlikely places such as Josef Stalin’s Russia. In the mid 1930s, in the heart of the swing era, Shostakovich wrote two ‘Jazz Suites’ that were intended to “raise the level of Soviet jazz from popular ‘cafe music’ to music with a professional status.” Of these, the second one, written in 1938, is the more interesting.



It’s not exactly classical music and it’s not exactly jazz, though it’s much closer to classical than jazz. After a bit of searching, I found a CD titled *The Jazz Album* (London 43 3 702-2) with both of these suites, plus Shostakovich’s first piano concerto. The reason I went out of my way to find it is one of the movements in the second Jazz Suite, a marvelous, surreal little waltz, was used in the movie *Eyes Wide Shut* (at the beginning and over the end credits). There’s also one other little throw-in on this CD that has a story behind it; it’s a version of *Tea For Two* for orchestra, where the orchestration was done – on a bet – by Shostakovich. While still students in conservatory in 1928, Shostakovich’s friend Nikolai

Maiko laid some money on the table and said that Shostakovich could not do a symphonic orchestration of *Tea For Two* in an hour. Maiko turned out to be right, but Shostakovich still picked up the money – it actually took him just 40 minutes. Hey, he was a genius! ☀

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## Afterword:

There’s room for one more essay, and this last one once again has the topic of music. But in this case it’s not about the music itself, but the effect the music can have on the listener. Sometimes it just sneaks right into you and won’t let go.

# I Hear the Whistle But I Can't Go

For several days near the end of last year I had a musical companion up in my headspace. And it just *would not* go away. You know very well what it is, because we've all experienced them from time to time – that's right, an *earworm*.

Behavioral scientists have a more technical term for it: 'stuck song syndrome', which is also a pretty good three-word description. When something like "Baby Shark" becomes firmly embedded, we eventually start wondering if we'll *ever* be rid of it.

A recent occurrence for me happened back in December, and what caused it was the baseball newsletter/blog that I subscribe to – Craig Calcaterra's *Cup of Coffee*. Craig is a skilled writer (he formerly had charge of **NBCnews.com**'s *Hardball Talk* blog) and each day's *CoC* is informative and usually pretty entertaining to read. Especially since Craig includes more than just baseball news and commentary – he ends each issue by writing about something (often random) that piqued his interest and he always includes a link to a music video that tenuously relates to it. And for December 11<sup>th</sup> that happened to be Steely Dan's "My Old School".

And that's what became my earworm. To be sure, it's a pretty great song so I couldn't much complain about its existence in my brain. And it provided me a chance to revisit the lyrics which, way back in 1973 when it was originally released, had pretty much mystified rock music listeners – what the heck were "35 sweet good-byes" and "the Wolverine up to Annandale" and "I hear the whistle but I can't go" and "oh no, Guadalajara won't do" and "tried to warn you about Chino and Daddy Gee" and especially "your daddy was quite surprised to find you with the working girls in the county jail" all about?

But that was then. Nowadays we have the Internet and more specifically the **songmeanings.com** website, which hosts an online forum where knowledgeable rock music fans comment on (and in many cases painstakingly dissect) songs from bygone eras to figure out what the writers were up to. And they had a field day with "My Old School".

Several of them referenced a interview that *Entertainment Weekly* had done with Donald Fagen, Steely Dan's lead singer, where it was revealed that the song described a 1969 police raid and pot bust of an entire dorm at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. Which included Fagen and his future band mate Walter Becker. The college had been complicit in setting it up, and even though it later relented and arranged bail for all the students they didn't do so for Fagen's girlfriend (a non-student), who had happened to be with him when it all went down. So, as the song relates, her father had to come to the jail to get her out. Even though the charges were eventually dismissed, this so much soured Fagen on the college that he didn't attend his graduation and for many years afterwards refused to go back to Annandale-on-Hudson.

It's all described in the song, and there's a Wikipedia page that succinctly summaries it. What was probably the most eye-opening bit for me is the identity of 'Daddy Gee', who had colluded with the college to set up the bust – it was an up-and-coming District Attorney named G. Gordon Liddy.

All this was interesting to read, to say the least, and it's increased my appreciation of the song. It had already been one of my two favorites by Steely Dan, so I'm actually happy it became a 'stuck song' for a while. Too bad all earworms aren't as good. ☀

