

LULLABY OF BROADWAY

By Mary Moreno

“Ladies and gentlemen, please return your seat backs to their original upright position and fasten your seatbelts. We’ll be touching down at LaGuardia in approximately twelve minutes.”

The captain’s voice, tinged with a trace of the South, cuts through the PA system. Corny as it might sound, the very words send a shiver of excitement through my body.

I peer down from my window seat and there below me, majestic in its evening attire, is Manhattan, the pinnacle of my ambition for so many years. Tiny dots of streetlights cast a pinkish glow around the island, surrounding it like a precious necklace. Somewhere down there, a job, an apartment, and the love of my life are awaiting me.

Like most of my Chicago ad agency colleagues, I long to be part of the New York advertising scene, because that’s where all the award-winning commercials are being created. But the attraction for me is more than just the advertising big league – it’s the music: the opportunity to study at Juilliard, to find a great voice teacher, to maybe even pursue my dream of cutting an album, abandoned so many years ago when I surrendered to the allure of a steady paycheck. Even with a day job, I figure I can still find time to practice my music.

The plane touches down a few minutes ahead of schedule, and I'm hoping that everything about this trip goes as smoothly as the landing. I've written and called ahead to several headhunters, and they've scheduled some interviews for me over the coming week.

I instruct the taxi driver to take me to the Hotel Tudor, an inexpensive residential hotel on East 42nd Street. My mind is filled with images of Bette Davis and Celeste Holm in "All About Eve," James Cagney in "Public Enemy Number One," and Tony Curtis and Burt Lancaster in "Sweet Smell of Success," as the cab fights its way through traffic streaming over the Triborough Bridge, taking me home.

Home. I always used to pretend, whenever I traveled here to produce commercials for McDonald's, that the ride into town was taking me home, instead of to a five-day stay in a hotel. I'd try to imagine what it might feel like to be a real New Yorker. Now I'm going to find out.

There's no bellhop at the Tudor, and I almost need a roadmap to find my room. I travel a series of twisting, dimly lighted corridors that eventually lead me to the back of the building where my cubbyhole is waiting. It provides just enough space for the single bed, a small chest of drawers and a tiny desk. It doesn't smell too good, either, but it's only \$25 a night, and I know it's only temporary. Even though we're in the midst of Nixon's recession, there seem to be plenty of openings in the advertising business, especially for writers at my salary level. Soon I'll find an apartment with a view of the city.

After unpacking, I make my way down to the lobby restaurant. I enjoy a couple of scotches and a burger, collect a Coca Cola in a plastic cup, and navigate my way back to my room.

Later, as I drift off to sleep with visions of window offices and penthouse apartments dancing through my head, I hear music coming from the room next door. It's Leonard

Bernstein's "New York, New York," from the Broadway hit, "On the Town." It premiered in 1944, same year I was born. I take it as a good omen and fall into a deep sleep.

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"People think just because they composed classical music they were sober and sedate. But they were just like contemporary musicians – coke, opium, booze, they did it all. Hell, Beethoven was the wildest one in the bunch. A total deviant. He even fucked goats."

I don't know if he's pulling my leg or if he's serious, but I always learn something new at my weekly piano lesson with Nelson Silver. A former sideman who's played with Bird, Mingus, and even Tito Puente, Nelson is a musical genius who enjoys a reputation as the best piano teacher in the city. I take my lesson on my lunch hour.

I love escaping the corporate world and entering the peaceful disarray of Nelson's studio on West 58th. The drapes are always drawn, giving the place a cozy, den-like atmosphere. The living room houses both a baby grand and a Fender Rhodes electric keyboard, and it usually reeks of marijuana. Sometimes we begin my lesson by sharing a joint. It helps loosen me up.

Lessons with Nelson are nothing like the training I received at the Chicago Conservatory before I got sidetracked into the corporate world. In addition to the classics like Bach and Mozart, I'm learning to play works by 20th Century composers like Bartok and Stravinsky, along with a collection of piano bar favorites ranging from Cole Porter to Billy Joel. Nelson's also teaching me orchestration and arranging. He says my goal should be to eliminate the need to hire an arranger for the advertising jingles I now write and produce, and create the arrangements myself. This seems ambitious, but if Nelson thinks I can do it, I'm willing to try. He's also

suggested I find a part-time gig as a piano bar player, because the experience out in the real world will be invaluable.

Today we're working on improvisation. Nelson sits at the Fender Rhodes and plays a bass line while I compose a melody over it on the baby grand. I find this exercise terrifying, but also quite liberating. Sometimes I get so lost in the music I amaze myself. Today, however, I'm blocked. I have a lot on my mind — work issues that need resolving, impossible deadlines I need to meet. I know my playing sounds stiff and starchy, but I can't seem to relax into it.

"Mary, have you ever done heroin?" Nelson asks after I've completely screwed up a Bill Evans piece I've been working on for months.

"Well, no," I reply, a little miffed. How could he dream of offering me heroin? That's really out of my league.

"I think it's time you tried it," he says, disappearing into the bedroom. When he returns with a piece of folded up white paper, I watch, half fascinated, half horrified, as Nelson unwraps it, revealing a small mound of white powder. It looks a bit like cocaine, but not as shiny.

"Geez, I don't know, Nelson, I've never used a drug where a needle was involved."

"Don't worry, we're not going to shoot it, we're just going to snort it."

Nelson measures out a pinch of powder on the cover of my Chopin Preludes and carefully draws two lines with his single-edged razor blade.

He hands me a straw. "Bon appetit," he says.

What the hell, you only live once I tell myself, as I draw the line of heroin up into my nose, expecting the kind of sensual explosion I sometimes experience with coke; but instead, there's just a little irritation. I choke back a sneeze and inhale the second line into the other

nostril. Nothing. Then Nelson measures out two lines for himself, snorts them up, and suggests we get back to our respective keyboards.

“I don’t understand all the fuss about heroin,” I say. “I don’t feel a thing.”

Nelson just smiles and begins playing a bass line on “Joy Spring.” I place my hands on the keyboard, waiting for the appropriate moment to make an entrance, and then find myself kind of melting into the beat, creeping up on the melodic line like a cat approaching a saucer full of fine tuna. I pounce on a dominant seven chord with a flat nine and then my fingertips begin to dance around the keyboard. Suddenly, I’m filled with inspiration, and I improvise fearlessly, creating my own interpretation of the tune, effortlessly adding chords with altered fifths and ninths. I’m hot. I’m cool. I’m a bad-assed motherfucker, and right this minute, no one can touch me, no one can hurt me, no one can make me feel inadequate or limited or untalented. I’m floating on a pink candy cloud, enveloped in a cocoon of music, and it’s flowing out from my brain and my fingertips almost simultaneously. Holy shit, I’m channeling Miles!

The rest of the lesson passes in a pleasant haze of unstructured creativity, as I play like I’ve never played before, joyously, effortlessly, until I am jolted by the sound of the doorbell, signifying that Nelson’s one o’clock student has arrived. I pack up my music and waltz out the door, thanking him for a great lesson.

It’s one of those unseasonably warm February afternoons, with a touch of premature spring softening the air. I stroll back to the office, smiling at everyone I encounter on the street. Once encaged in the steel and concrete high rise, I march into my creative director’s office and quit my day job.

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The Brass Rail is a two-story firetrap on 45th and Broadway that caters to the theater crowd before eight and hookers who work the bar after ten. Outside in the melting Manhattan night it's 103 degrees, but in here the air conditioning is making my fingers so numb it's difficult to move them around the keyboard. One of the diners, a beefy heifer of a man with sour cream stains on the front of his plaid sports coat, has requested Kander & Ebb's "New York, New York," and I'm doing my best to remember the words.

I've been employed as the Rail's lounge pianist for the past four months now. Mr. Singh, a very small, very angry-looking dark brown man with ominous black eyes and matching mustache, is the restaurant manager, and his taste in music runs to big breasts behind the piano. Mine are small, but I compensate with long shapely legs, which I display with great abandon from under my tiny black miniskirt. Because the piano is elevated on a platform at the front of the room, he can grab an eyeful of leg every time he looks my way, which he does with a scowl whenever I get carried away with my music and start distracting the diners from their food.

Mr. Singh told me on my first night, "Just play background music, not too loud, and when you sing, keep it soft. I can't stand girl singers who belt."

Right now he's flashing me one of his murderous looks, but how can anyone sing "New York, New York" without belting like Liza?

I get paid \$75 cash for six hours' work, with four fifteen-minute breaks and dinner thrown in, as well. He'll probably skimp on my dinner tonight, telling the chef to give me smaller portions, punishing me for the performance I am turning in at this moment. So I figure I may as well enjoy myself and I crank up the volume. I've placed a brandy snifter on top of the piano, and depending on how many martinis the diners consume, it will hold another \$20 to \$50 in tips

before the evening is over. This isn't exactly the big time career in music I envisioned for myself back in the Midwest, but it's a great gig because I'm literally getting paid to practice.

I finish "New York, New York," then segue into a medley I designed for the hookers: "She Works Hard for the Money" and "Private Dancer." There are two at the bar right now, early birds who stopped in for a drink before hitting the street, and they're getting ready to leave. As they sashay past the piano on their way out, one of them winks at me and drops a twenty in my brandy snifter. Whereas the clown who requested "New York, New York," now busy scarfing up his wife's dessert, will probably tip nothing.

It's time for my first break, so I close the set with "Just the Way You Are" and head for the ladies lounge where I'll smoke a cigarette or two. Mr. Singh and three Middle Eastern-looking gentlemen are sitting at a table in the corner close to the door.

"Chickie, Chickie, come over here," Mr. Singh calls. He addresses all the women who work at the Rail as 'Chickie.'

"I want you to meet some important people, Chickie. They have requests for songs."

I pretend not to hear and keep walking. Safely inside the lounge, I collapse onto a dusty overstuffed sofa and fish through my handbag for a cigarette.

One of these days I'm going to quit smoking. It's getting in the way of my singing. Sometimes when I'm going for a high note, my voice cracks or it comes out all hoarse and raspy. I grind out my unfinished cigarette in the big brass ashtray, repair my eyeshadow and exit through the double doors, making my way back to the piano.

The room is packed and noisy now, with all eyes riveted to the giant screen behind the bar. The Mets are apparently poised to wipe out the Red Sox and win the seventh game of the World Series. The bartender is reluctant to turn off the TV and risk inciting a riot. Mr. Singh and

his cronies are nowhere to be seen, so I retreat back to the ladies lounge for another smoke or two. When I return, Mr. Singh is perched on the piano bench.

"Since when do you take a forty-five minute break? Collect your things and get out, Chickie, you went too far this time."

I'd forgotten to turn my mic off, so the entire room hears my rude dismissal. Thankfully, no one applauds.

So much for getting paid to practice.

After collecting my music and my tips, I escape into the noisy relief of the Broadway night. I decide to splurge and hail a cab, ignoring the bus waiting at the corner. I instruct the driver to stop a block away from my apartment so that I can swing by the all-night newsstand to pick up my Sunday Times and a couple of Hershey Bars. Tomorrow I will stay in bed all day just reading and listening to music. Then on Monday I'll think about what I'm going to do with the rest of my life.

I drift off to sleep with the melody of "New York, New York" running through my mind. If I can just make it here...

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