



The Ballad of a Boat

Thursday, 24 January 2008

The time has come, once again, for all sidewalk sailors to bring their rocky mountain goats onto their little sailboats, so to speak. To range out upon a temporal scene, to descend into a basement of bricks where there is no shade from the bare light bulb, from the wan yellow compact fluorescent beams. The light is as slight as the bricks are thick. There is potential at the top of the rickety stairs and nothing but work at the bottom. The Sidewalk Boys will roll the circular songs up the square stairs. Give them a lever and they will write the world a ballad. The Ballad of a Boat.

Rolling that Ball

Saturday, 26 January 2008

The basement blues studio is slowly taking shape. The ball is rolling up and down the rickety stairs. Plans regarding all this ascending and descending have been digitized and blasted back and forth through cyberspace (which now appears to be a real place, if just a bit dirty.) But the basement is clean. The amps are humming here. The instruments are warming up their voices; at least those that sing. There is a stillness here that speaks of an impending artistic storm, a cacophony of tuning and random motifs. And the ideas are all still up in the air swirling around getting to know each other and worse. (I hear complaints but always defer to the greater good.) The mission here is to compress all ideas and musical notes into a solid block and begin removing the material that does not belong. We have our hammers. We have our chisels. We have our shopvacs. We have mischief in mind for the remaining rubble of notes and words. And, as is always the case, we have the Sidewalk Boys rolling that ball up and down the rickety stairs.

Stories Become Ballads

Monday, 28 January 2008

Last night the banjo met with the mandolin and the cracked Alvarez while the owners were busy with mundane duties such as drinking, laughing, and discussing the potential pairing of sixteenth notes with selected letters of the English alphabet. The basement has been burdened under the weight of dogfish head ale and recording gear. Toasts were exchanged with promises to “get the dogs down here somehow.” In a perfect world the stories become ballads and the Sidewalk Boys balladeers. The old double O agrees with this and rips off a riff in E minor. Jackie Kerouac rolls over in his grave. After all the time spent digging out the basement it seems to have filled back in. No one understands how. The Boys agree to dig. What else can they do? The meeting is adjourned until the cracks are repaired, the banjo cleared of all wrongdoing, and the mando returns from the mount

One More Day

Wednesday, 30 January 2008

The last brick is mortared in place. The concrete floor is suitably cracked with old rugs on the floor for the dogs. The Kerosun gives off a smoky yellow glow as the microphone stands hold vigil for the Sidewalk Boys. Wicker baskets are hung matter-of-factly from the carrying sticks while Old Gus looks down business-like from the wall. A slight pressure builds as geologic time advances at a ponderous crawl. One candle, one bare light bulb, one day before the challenge. A stasis of sorts for all the sixteenth notes, for all the swirling ideas. All of the ones and zeroes are held in check and randomized for another day. The Sidewalk Boys are beholden to wait for one more day to once again arrange the wicker baskets, the sixteenth notes, the ones and zeros and the letters of the English language.

Plethora of plenty

Saturday, 02 February 2008

Ideas were falling out of the air like bricks last night. Things appeared somewhat blurry without the glasses, a little muffled with the one bad ear. The piano will wait this one out, pensive and quiet. The old 12 came out of the shell. Ancient tones rang in the challenge this year. Sadly, alcohol was also a factor in all the brick flinging and mortar slinging; but, since life is a continual celebration anyway the Sidewalk Boys, by comparison, showed wisdom and restraint, at least for the most part. However, the bottle was passed three times ‘round again. Old Sidewalk went a little bit overboard. He’s been around too long with thick, thick skin.

It was a plethora of plenty last night with a four course meal of music. It was a wan suffusion of softness that seemed to round off all the corners, seemed to soften all the blows. It was a red ocher sunset in the basement. No hard edges anywhere, like the old Frigidaire, like the old 55 in the drive. The Boys did their best not to screw things up this time, to put the digits just so. Not an easy task, even in the harsh bright light of the upstairs where mama don’t allow. The Boys did their best in the cramped quarters where

negotiation is the game, where gravity has settled low long ago. Chunkman was burdened with capturing the innocence of the slightly guilty while Sidewalk and the Dump traded ballads in the form of sixteenth notes trying to get their stories straight. Meanwhile the bare light bulb blared down its brilliance on the Boys and their attempts to collude, to coagulate, to collect that rare innocence of sheer rehearsed spontaneity.

The Old 12

Thursday, 07 February 2008

The Old 12 has awakened from its long sleep to ring out deep rich tones that speak volumes to the topics at hand. The finish is laced with tiny cracks that tell tales of the dry cold of winter's basement, the damp mug of summer's red brick air. After all this time it has a lot to say about being pent up waiting; away from the usual basement activities, from all the artistic happenings that flashed by in the dry cold and the damp mug. The human who seemingly shuffles around the house aimlessly has grown old, mountains of laundry have risen and fallen, the wheel of human time has ground off the sharp edges and the Gibson case was closed, secured against it all. The even Older 6 remarked that, "You just can't shut that Old 12 up, it's been that long." The Piano agreed pointing out that, at intervals, whole histories can come and go between ballads. But the Old 12 is awake and is rumbling from the bottom on down, hungry for the tape to roll, thirsty for a bottle of bread. The Old 12 knows the Sidewalk Boys are coming and will wait as it has done for all of winter's basement, for all of the damp mug of summer's red brick air.

Forward Full Speed

Saturday, 09 February 2008

Grandpa Gus stares down from the wall all business-like in a suit made of money; money that long ago flowed over some dam in the Adirondacks. Gone from the basement that's all we know. Quite frankly the Dulcimer is tired of being on display with the "Little Man" Limberjack. They are anxious to jump into the musical fracas. The Dulcimer threatens to tune itself; certainly no one else can. The wooden vase full of antique drum sticks is in on it. They all know the caper is going down. We attack on "Diggin' Out." That's the plan. The Alvarez gives the Banjo a side-wise and knowing glance. Amateurs all. The tune continues with surprising ease. The Mandolin is an old friend now and knows where the beer is. Now the tunes are flowing like Dogfish Head ale and the Sidewalk Boys have the Dulcimer and Limberjack in the back of their minds going forward full speed.

Dull Day

Sunday, 10 February 2008

Dull daylight, full of February chill, seeps through old casement windows blending with the singular and iconic glare of the bare light bulb. Its radiance is mingled with, at times, dazzling sunlight then suddenly back to a sullen grayness, the kind where snow seems to hang motionless in the air sometimes staying that way for days, even weeks, always getting in the way. Always tracking in with the dogs. Daylight in the basement is always a

weekend affair and the Older 6 is mopping up for tomorrow's session. The chill goes deep; no one has troubled themselves with turning on the heat, which means the floor beer will be cold. The Mandolin is back in the mountains, this time in back snowy Utah country. The Alvarez will be over soon bringing Buster to hang with Rosie and all the other dogs here. That should warm things up. Meanwhile the Tierneycaster busted out of its case today rusty strings and all. The reunion with the Tone 45 was touching but not convincing. The Old 12 frowned down from the couch while Gus' old double barrel muzzle load took notice but referred it all right back to the dull daylight, full of February chill.

Five Pound Sledge

Monday, 11 February 2008

The Alvarez dropped by with a five pound sledge tonight and pounded out some arrangements with the Old 12 while the dogs were restless below. The Banjo kept its distance by repeating a rolling pattern from some old murder ballad. The Boys gave a Tuckerman's Toast to the Mandolin who is still up in the mountains. Despite it all ambient sound still prevailed. The back door was left open for the muse who was expected at any moment. All the bare light bulbs left on so the dogs could find their way back in. The Tone 45 stepped up to the plate and hit a homer, right over Chunkman's left field wall. The sledge was called in for some fine tuning but the Banjo wanted to handle it in-house, nice and quiet like. Most of the ideas have fallen out of the red brick air by now and the Sidewalk Boys have work to do; five pound sledges to wield, bricks to stack, old fiddle tunes to kick start.

The Old Wooden Chair

Saturday, 16 February 2008

The Sidewalk Boys turned the heat way up in the basement last night and sat glued to the old wooden chairs. Rosie crowded in. The Mandolin asked why everything down here was so old. The sweat was in the air, the digits went in the can. The sound was ambient in reverence to the old cassette player. The cracked Alvarez took its leave all buzzed and bowed and faded back into the Chinese sunset. The Old 12 and the Double O stepped in like heroes waving flags. Whole civilizations were saved from the antics of the Alvarez. The Mandolin stroked its chin in deep thought. The Piano was in the shop grinding down all the sharp edges. The Boys sat like statues glued to their wooden chairs grinding off their own edges. The Banjo had trouble keeping it up. The little knob things at the end of the neck were twisted back and forth in a vain effort to conform to the wishes of the tuner. In the end the bottle was passed three times around and that served to grind the edges even further down allowing the songs to eventually roll up the angular and rickety stairs.

Trouble Light

Monday, 18 February 2008

The trouble light was hung from the ceiling with care to cast long shadows under the bare light bulb. The mountain train pulled away in search of the lost Alvarez. The Takamine was sober having returned from rehab to fill in the chunk. The Older 6 was inactivated until the steep climb up Desolation Peak. The Boys were busy wearing their fingers to the bone on the cliffs of music. Trip hazards were ground down as needed along the way. The Old 12 spoke aloud in a jingle jangle voice blurring the edges of distinction while Old Sidewalk's voice was cracked and broken from too many freeze thaw cycles. The Mandolin's voice, pure and unspoken, was urged to sing out by the muzzle load. The Little Boat tacked back and forth across the great sump searching for a shorter route to Ontario. Beer bottles were cleared from the basement while the upstairs women frowned into the recycle bucket. It was cookies and water all the way for the rest of the day.

Bottle of Bread

Friday, 22 February 2008

It is the start of the basement beginning and the attic end. The ideas have swirled out of the red brick air and coalesced in the wan yellow light. The basement is richer for the rubble of words and notes; some grundles, some trinkets. There is lemonade on the front porch with a young wife, also on the old running board. There is a toast to the setting sun, and again when it rises. The boat sunk in the Great Sump threatening to take the ballad down with it. The Sidewalk Boys have on their snowshoes for that endless journey across the basement snow fields, for the journey to lose the deep sea mistakes, starting with the clams on up. The hard trek continues as the phlegm cutter is passed around. The 1958 Double O gets a new set of strings, the Boys get India Pale and a bottle of bread. Disagreements are agreed to. Agreements are disagreed to. The Banjo has had a bad week. The Takamine plays on with notes of encouragement. The Mandolin is back in the mountains. In this setting and in this time frame the ideas have swirled out of the red brick air.

Crack By Crack

Saturday, 23 February 2008

The Sidewalk Boys drew a circle on the cracked concrete floor. The trouble light shone down. The Boys dug for gold using the Banjo, the Mandolin, and the Old 12 as spades. The lager flowed over the levee sweeping away the remaining rubble. Glue was brought forth to catch the arrangements as they swirled by. Gold bars were stacked ready for the precarious trip up the rickety stairs. Most of the grundles have been carved from solid rock waiting for the trinkets to bring beer. Chunkman called for calm while the Mandolin stalked the Banjo. Both pointed to the Chunk who was standing alone and proud, well within the boundaries of distinction. The Muzzle Load looked on from his perch proclaiming the virtues of rock salt and nails. All looked down and pondered the circle as geologic time advanced crack by crack.

Richer For the Rubble

Sunday, 24 February 2008

Congress convened in the basement tonight while the Sidewalk Boys threw color at the walls, tinkets at the barren rocks of rhythm. Chunk played the cracked concrete floor along with every other heavenly object in the room. Old Sidewalk had never seen anything like it with his one good ear, never heard such beauty with his own bad eyes. Just Chunk and two old sticks beating out ballads on the board, on the bricks, candlesticks, on heat pipes and the like. He took it up and down the rickety stairs a few times let me tell you. Then it was time for the Boys to sing like birds. Then it was time to sit with hats on the couch under the bare light bulb cradling the Muzzle Load just for some second order effect. It was then that the Muse arrived to help carry the gear and the dogs out the back bulkhead. The songs were then trudged unceremoniously up the rickety stairs with little fanfare. The myth was just that. In the end it is just the songs become ballads with the Boys becoming balladeers; better for the beer and richer for the rubble.

