



# The last to be told, the least likely to be heard.

## *a jazz pianist's memories of Washington Square Bar and Grill*

by Dick Fregulia

The evening of Wednesday, January 2, was to have marked the beginning of my 33rd consecutive year of playing jazz piano Thursday nights at Washington Square Bar and Grill. Much of the time I played alone, but there were periods when I also worked with singers or bass players. In the last few years I was even able to add a jam session with my quartet the first Wednesday of each month.

The first Wednesday of the new year was a little different, though. The drummer and I had driven over from Marin together. We found the perfect parking place across from the Square. Omar rolled out of the passenger side, looked across the street, and asked, "Are you sure we have a gig tonight?" The place was dark. We crossed the street and read the sign on the locked door. It said basically, "Washington Square B&G has closed its doors. Thanks for the Memories."

To most people the Wasbag (ouch, call it "The Square") was a watering hole for serious drinkers who secondarily had business to attend to, connections to make, sometimes even appetites to be satisfied. Lunches were famous and lasted forever. Nightfall brought on new circumstances, though, which could easily have spiralled out of control. What often held the joint together, even raised it to a new level of sophistication, was the jazz piano. At least that's what I liked to think.

"What a bunch of assholes." original co-owner Sam Deitsch used to comment looking down the lineup at the bar on a normal busy night. "But I'll put my assholes up against anybody else's in town," he'd conclude. Sam was authentic New York City - hip, smart, and caustic - and he knew musicians like Ed Moose, his partner, knew politicians. He was our advocate and our protector. He was also fastidious about removing any coffee cups or empty ash trays that had been left on the piano top, and when pushed, he would even "86" a customer who was harassing the piano player.

As one of the house pianists in the 1970's and 80's I frequently had to deal with more than my share of noisy, obnoxious groups while I was playing serious jazz. Invariably, though, the worst one of the group would come up and compliment me on the obscure Monk or Clifford Brown tune I had just been playing. That was one of the most redeeming qualities of The Square. People were, by in large, multi-dimensional, and one of those dimensions had an appreciation for jazz.

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One of my nicest memories involving audience attention was the night that a good looking woman with a little glow came up and requested What Are You Doing the Rest of you Life? by Michele Legrande. I played it with sensitivity and intensity worthy of my favorite pianist, Bill Evans. Shortly after the tune she came back up, this time in tears. "My boyfriend just proposed to me," she explained joyfully.

Most of the time I was left to my own devices, which were often highly contrived. . The night of a full moon I would play all the moon tunes I could think of (Old Devil Moon, Blue Moon,...etc). If I felt like traveling I could play a musical trip around the world (Autumn in New York, April in Paris, Turn a Surriento, East of the Sun). Sometimes I would play a set of Harry Warren or George Gershwin or Horace Silver. Playing all the tunes on one classic jazz album (Miles' Kind of Blue, the Nancy Wilson/Cannonball Adderly album, or Erroll Garner's Concert by the Sea) also worked, often taking up a whole set. Generally most people didn't get it. Invariably, though, someone did, and would come up to let me know. That made all the difference.

One gimmick that only one person got was my "Songwriter Competition Applause Meter" show. Amadio Cabral, a North Beach musical institution himself, was a successful songwriter, singer, guitarist, independent CD producer, and former club owner. When he came in to hang out I would greet him by playing one of his songs, which was generally followed by an applause. Then I would play one of my originals, which would also muster some applause if I utilized a gimmick ending that demanded attention. Then I would alternate between his tunes and mine with the two of us judging the amount of applause generated by each.

The late Neal Riofski, a favorite bartender through the 80's and 90's, was another who got it. I could string together a series of Sinatra-on-Capitol tunes and he would respond with the name of each album. Dick Broderick, another bartender from that era, knew just what to do at the end of the evening. Recognizing my last tune of the night (Walking My Baby Back Home), he would cue up a CD with the finesse of a jazz disc jockey. As my last note faded out, he would ever so gently fade in the voice of Willie Nelson singing Stardust.

In general my modus operandi was to challenge myself musically, satisfy most the customers superficially, keep the pulse going, and play the room like a bebop film score. Scanning the mirror I could pick out a romantic couple or someone tapping his foot at the bar, or possibly a private investigator unconvering an important clue in the mirrors. On second thought, maybe it was all done with mirrors.

So how did I get this gig, and how did I manage to survive so long?

I first worked there in the fall of 1974, in its first year of operation. I had heard on the KJAZ hotline that a local jazz pianist Jim Lowe (also keyboardist for the Cleveland Wrecking Company) was playing at a new place called Washington Square Bar and Grill. I later figured out that he preceded the actual piano and was playing his own electric grand in the front window alcove. I was just cynical enough to guess that by now he had lost the gig and it was up for grabs.

I went in and grabbed it. The new piano was just to the left of the entrance, comfortably spaced between the front window table and the end of the bar. There was no mirror, no second room. If I looked to the right I could

converse with someone at the bar, to the left I could converse with the couple at the window table.

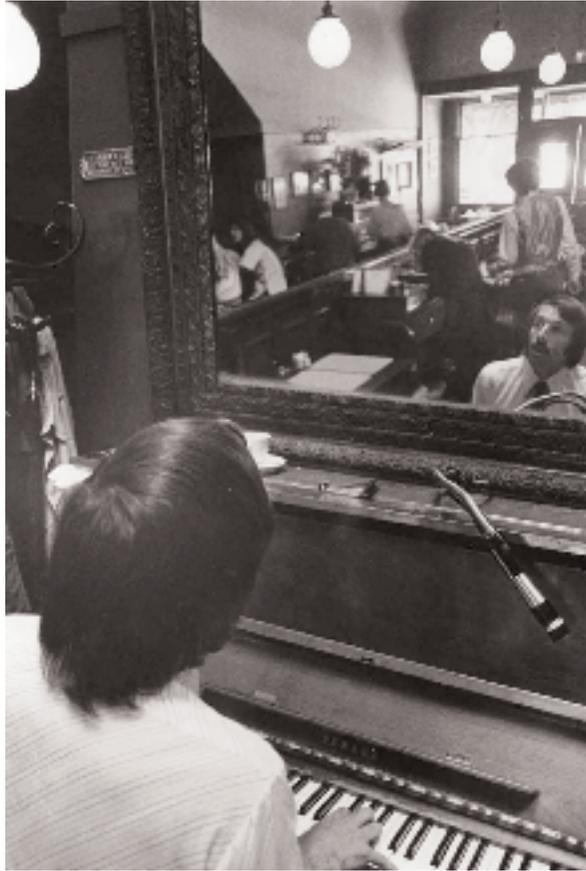
One night several weeks into the gig I was called to the phone by the bartender during a break. On the phone was Ed Moose (the dominant co-owner), informing me that I was to be replaced by another local jazz pianist who had an actual following and was going to play five nights a week. It was about that time that they also knocked out the walls and expanded into what had previously been a Chinese aquarium store next

door. The Square rapidly became the hottest spot in town, and I was banished to the Hungry Tiger in the Cannery, where I worked in obscurity five nights a week for almost a year.

When the Hungry Tiger gig folded I renewed my efforts to get the Square gig back. By then the place was mobbed. They had piano players six nights a week, but reserved Thursday as "audition" night. I went in and played for free several weeks. Sam, who was now in charge of booking the music, took a liking to me and told me to study Norma Teagarden, the Wednesday night pianist, and how she played the room. I did, and several weeks later Sam offered me the gig. It was a union contract, with Sam adding that it was good "for life, and included all the pasta I could eat." "But," Sam later added, "You need to generate three times what we pay you in bar revenue."

The pay was reasonably good at \$60, but I was particularly drawn to the food. At the beginning it was too busy to take my pasta sitting in the dining room, so I would eat at a little fold-down shelf in the kitchen between the dishwashers and the cooks. When that was too busy I would take my dinner out to the deadend alley behind the kitchen and eat by moonlight.

Out front in the main rooms everybody was a celebrity, which is probably why the real ones always felt comfortable there. Tom Brokaw would come up and give me a shoulder rub as I played. Bobby Short would walk in with a group and wave to me through the mirror over the piano. Frances Ford Coppola would come in around midnight and eat by himself several tables away from the piano. Lauren Bacall once settled in with the Eden Brothers at the table right next to the piano. Even George Wendt (Norm from Cheers) walked past my



back and ordered a beer from the bar. Unfortunately, I had to be told who it was because Cheers was originally a Thursday night program, the night I always worked.

The musicians who came in were also special. Bill Evans, probably the most influential jazz pianist of the last half of the 20th century, came in one night with Linda Goldstein, a singer with whom I shared the bandstand for awhile. They were having a drink at the bar when Bill remarked that if he was playing piano it would probably command no more attention that I was getting. He was telling Linda the story of how a waiter once led a couple directly between him and the piano keyboard (while he was playing) in order to seat them in a crowded lounge. So we decided to switch. I went to the bar to chat with the Linda, while he worked his way to the piano and played. Nothing changed.

Earl Fatha Hines, perhaps the most influential jazz pianist of the first half of the 20th century, would also come in with his daughter. Unfortunately he was well into his 80's and suffering from dementia, so he could no longer play. He seemed to enjoy the scene, though. A more alert Dave Frishberg, a pianist-singer-songwriter who bridged both halves of the jazz century, walked by one night when I was playing one of his tunes, including a wrong chord in the second measure. Two days later I received a lead sheet with the correct chord changes in the mail.

At some point I became a celebrity of sorts. My 15 minutes came in 1983 when I was the subject of a Bill Mandel column on the second page of the SF Examiner, complete with a 3-column portrait by photographer Fran Ortiz. The column survived the day, but the photograph was replaced in the home edition by one of Queen Elizabeth arriving at some special event. Nevertheless, I continued to be named Bill's favorite saloon pianist in his annual Billy Awards. Another column and picture of me appeared in the now defunct North Beach Gazette. Amandio came in one night reporting that he had been walking down the street and saw my picture looking up at him from a discarded Gazette on the sidewalk.

Herb Caen (whose favorite song was Topsy as played by Benny Goodman) never mentioned me in his column as the pianist, but we did play on the Les Lapins softball team together and that gained me mention twice

as a "slugger." I also achieved immortality on page 59 of Ron Fimrite's book *The Square*, being compared to the other pianists as a "somewhat more modern stylist." In retrospect, my star status existed only in the context of being a pianist at *The Square*.

After twenty years the Ed Moose-Sam Deitsch era came to an end, Ed having his fill of union contracts, health care benefits, and retirement fund payments. Ownership was passed on to Peter Lomax, a restaurateur who had been helping out at the Square and who had previously owned the *Coachman* and *Monroe's*.

Without Ed and Sam, though, the energy level dropped precipitously, and so did mine. I almost lost the gig as a result, but I took hold and managed to re-invent myself with some new faux-stride piano stylings.

A couple of years later a young on-the-rise Peter Osborne bought the place and brought his own Ed Moose persona with him. Things picked up immediately, and as a bonus we got a new piano. The original Yamaha studio upright had done well, but it was worn out from 20 years of nightly playing. It had been a perfect instrument for the room. The action was easy and the sound traveled well around the walls so it could be heard anywhere

without being obtrusive. A small microphone, probably unnecessary, was placed behind it and a second mic extended above the piano for vocals. Amandio, a cabinet-maker by trade, had been in charge of maintaining the wood finish. Lynn Kennedy, who managed the books at times for all four owners, recognized the need to update it, though, and heroically put together the plan to replace it with a brand new version of the same model.

The fourth ownership of *The Square* came early in the new century when Guy and Rose Ferri bought it and converted to the *Cobalt Tavern*. Live music was not part of his original vision, but Guy had heard the closing night jam session of the *Osborne Square* and got caught up in the spirit of it. He called me the next morning to find out the number of another piano player he wanted to hire, but I convinced him that I was the ranking pianist and that we should sit down and talk.



He agreed to continue the jazz piano tradition, even though the place had a new color and a new name, and he gave me my Thursday nights back as well as the responsibility of scheduling the other pianists.

Cobalt Tavern immediately received top reviews from Chronicle food critic Michael Bauer, who loved the food but found the noise level (music) annoying. It was his habit to either ignore restaurant music altogether or to add it as another bell to his noise rating. At Cobalt we experimented with singers, small groups, guitars and jam sessions, but ended up settling back with piano as the traditional sound for the room. After two years Cobalt closed for a week, Guy retrieved all the original artifacts from storage, repainted, and then re-opened as the 21st Century Wash-bag. Hanging on the wall to the left of the piano was a framed copy of my first album, Sunday Morning at Washington Square.

Most the local good jazz pianists played The Square at one time or another. There were the great stride and swing players like Burt Bales (the first real draw at The Square); Norma Teagarden, , Ray Skjelbred, Mike Lipskin, John Horton Cooper, and Ed Wettland. The modernists like myself included Dick Conte, Mike Greensill, Don Alberts, Mark Levine, Chris Huson, and Ken Fishler. There were black pianists like Hyler Jones, Federico Cervantes, and BJ Papa, women like Gini Wilson, Susan Sutton, and Jeannie Hofman, and blind pianists like Alex Kalleo and Federico Cervantes. The longtimers who started in the 70's and finished in the 21st century included. Ken Fishler, Mike Lipskin, and myself.

At times we had sidemen, or even groups, which gave the place the aura of an actual jazz club. Norma had a group of joiners that included trombone (whose slide occasionally got caught up in passing waiters), clarinet, and bass. Mike Lipskin was often accompanied by a drummer, Skjelbred by soprano sax Dick Hadlock. John Cooper started with bassist Vernon Alley. Since there was a microphone available, I was able to couple with jazz singers, including Dorothy Moskowitz and Kitty Margolis. The last 13 years I was fre-

quently accompanied by bassist Vince Gomez, a retired music teacher who had grown up in North Beach. Playing with me on alternate Thursday nights, he brought back the spirit of his early hero, the Square's first bassist, Vernon Alley. Facing the audience as he played, Vince could chat up old high school mates, fellow Giants fans, or anyone that got too close to the bandstand. He was also very good at directing confused customers to the right bathroom



Possibly the best thing about the gig, though, was just being in North Beach on a regular basis.. My breaks, if not taken up by hobnobbing, were for wandering and scouting the neighborhood. In the 80's I could go around the corner to a jazz spot called Peta's, co-owned by my friend Amandio, and sit in with the rhythm section for a tune. The bar at Grant and Green also had a jazz group led by

Dick Partee. I could always walk up Columbus and catch half a dozen small groups at cafes or other restaurants. Other times I would go up to Capps to watch a basketball game with Neil (who eventually left the Square). I could grab a cappuccino at Mario's, or a cup of tea at a cafe on the site of my great grandparents' home 100 years ago.

Now I walk the streets of North Beach and try to enjoy the concept of being on one long break. I can leisurely enjoy my stops at Gelato Classico or Stella Pastries or Ristorante Ideale, and I still hear jazz from several venues along the way. When I get back to The Square, though, it is dark. Oftentimes someone else will show up, peek in the window, and we will strike up a conversation. Inside, the piano sits there under the mirror that reflects the set tables and the long empty bar. "There is no sound, not from the bar, not from the tables, not from the piano. There's nothing left to be heard. ■