

Epiphany on Rich Street

Bradley Sowash

I go to the gig disinterested. Just another Christmas party to play. The man in tuxedo - black and white behind a matching piano. Hired more for the look than the music. Thoughtfully positioned behind a ficus tree – indoor plant bedecked with ornaments of the season - also for looks and far from it's forest roots. Setting up music equipment again. The eleventh such event this season or is it twelve? The twelve days of Christmas spent behind a piano improvising variations on standards and carols. Putting heart into it, trying to make art for indifferent listeners. About to begin. Asked to wait. A special surprise – barbershop quartet appears to sing a few seasonal favorites. Armbands and suspenders surround pot bellies – bald heads disguised beneath Santa hats. They are out of tune. Uneven time leading to mismatched phrasing. Now it's my turn as dinner is served. Continuing education from the lead singer - singing is harder than piano playing he says. No response but he continues anyway. We have to sing in tune and rehearse. All you do is push buttons. I smile. He'll get no fight from me. Hands running through the set list again, I close my eyes. Dig in on a holiday classic. Try the new rhythmic twist discovered on another gig. Explore the concept. Follow the art with or without listeners. A tap on the shoulder. Eyes open. Yes, I'll turn down a bit. Sorry. Two hours. No breaks said the agent. A short gig he said. Back hurts anyway – built up from a busy season. Last night in a McMansion on a golf course. Arrived at the front door. You're not a guest. Use the back door - with the caterers. Fellow laborers in the hospitality industry. Watching the clock now. A gift. The VIP wants to speak so I stop 5 minutes early. A perfunctory thanks and applause for our pianist. All faces turn – some for the first time – we have a pianist? Smattering of applause. I'm introduced by the wrong name. Someone I've never heard of – wonder if he's playing somewhere tonight – perhaps under my name. Did the agent switch the contracts? I nod and pack up. Big state-of-the-art electric keyboard in a bigger case. Best there is and not even close to even a bad acoustic piano in

feel or tone. It's heavy so I put it on a dolly. Amp on next followed by a crate for mics, cables, and a portable stool balanced on top. Out in the lobby now sweating under my bow tie with the struggle through the double glass doors. The hotel guy is worried about scratches. Use the loading dock next time he says. Outside, it is snowing as I lay down the dolly. Extra wheels under the handle support the front. A rope allows it to be pulled. It's red. A penguin in a tuxedo is pulling a red wagon through a snowy street. It's slippery in dress shoes. Small front wheels find a crack and the rig goes down. Lids open. A microphone rolls through the slush to the curb. One wheel is spinning. The ball bearings inside tick as they roll freed from weight bearing duty. A yard sale of music equipment spread across a downtown intersection. Traffic light turns. Cars beep their horns moving in an eddy around me. Time stops. I am in a movie watching myself stare back at them – some bemused, some in a hurry, others still shopping, seeming to look for deals amidst my tools. I just stand there. It is a turning point. I know that I will never play "background music" again. Fifteen years is enough. Like talking on the phone without dialing first. Never again ask for requests. "Something by Sinatra?" I'd rather flip burgers. "Would you like a side of fries with that?" I'm done with that - a concert pianist now - transformed in one moment on a wintry street. I'm the only one who knows. It will be different – make recordings, take bows. It has to be. A pact is made – like an oath to myself: *Only play when people will listen*. Make every note count. Respect the music. Work it out somehow. Don't look back. Promises made and never broken. Follow the bliss, blessings will follow. Lay plans. Maybe play in churches. Offer benefit concerts to non-profits. Self-produce. Possibly teach. I leave the gig re-interested.