

INTERLUDE

Sue Mayfield Geiger

So, for the record: I'm an old blues and jazz singer who wore long black gloves and vampy, slit-up-the-leg dresses. Dangly earrings hung down my neck and rested on my shoulders. I held a boxy silver mic and crooned breathy tones through ruby-red lips and inhaled enough second-hand smoke that you would think I would not need to puff on the real thing. But puff away I did—on Chesterfields attached to a rhinestone cigarette holder—between breaks, mostly.

I worked with a three-piece band or just a piano player whose shiny black baby grand was my drawing card. I was slinking across the thing crooning “Night and Day” long before Michelle Pfeiffer was “Makin’ Whoopee” with the Baker Boys.

Certain songs in my repertoire were a tossup—“Night and Day” by Cole Porter or “Harlem Nocturne” by Earle Hagen and Dick Rogers. Both were turn-ons. The sultry, sexy “Harlem Nocturne” has been performed by sax-playing lounge lizards since the song’s inception. Anything in E flat minor casts a spell. But “Harlem Nocturne” gets under your skin and makes you sweat. It’s own “beat beat beat of the tom-tom” crosses over into Porter-land.

For the most part, I stood on bandstands in small, tucked-away bistros where people came to escape from their world and into mine. They left their daytime personas at the door and transformed into savvy night crawlers. Maybe they wanted to be me or do me, but it didn’t matter. I gave them E flats, G sharps, the key of F and looked right into their anonymous eyes when their look told me they were hungry for lyrics or just melody. I would hum along or even light up a Chesterfield on stage. My longest gig was at the Blue Note, a favorite

hangout for corporate types and lonely hearts in the sweltering Texas town-on-the-rise, Houston. The year was 1964.

The Blue Note was typical of the times: tucked away in the corner of a strip mall, dimly lit, secluded. A small elevated bandstand with a backdrop of burgundy velvet curtains was the focal point. The mahogany bar was opposite the bandstand and ran the entire length of the room. A smoky gray, gold-veined mirror graced the wall. Captain's chairs that swiveled made it easy for patrons to turn and look out across the room; scope out the crowd, or just look in the mirror discreetly. They also had a bird's eye view of me and the band, but I had the best observation point of all since I could see the whole place by just shifting my eyes from left to right and back.

There were about 20 tables with white tablecloths and tiny lamps. Big glass ashtrays sat on each table, with cigarette smoke streaming toward the ceiling, lingering there. The club was carpeted except for a square parquet dance floor in front of the bandstand. The menu was limited since this was not really a true supper club, but the type of nightclub where Cutty Sark and Jack Daniels were more important than filet mignon. But a decent strip steak with baked potato and salad could be whipped up by the owner's wife in the small kitchen in back of the bar.

One of the regulars—let's just call him my Number One Fan—worked in a nearby office building. Tall, thin, blond, with a million dollar smile, his blue eyes drifted from me to his vodka on the rocks every day from 6 p.m. until closing time. Married with kids, they had him on weekends—my gin joint got him weekday nights. Number One Fan was typical of the clientele—thirsty businessmen who stopped in for a drink or two or three before heading home. But this guy had innocence about him, almost like he didn't fit in with the club scene. He looked more like someone's prom date, all shiny-faced and hopeful.

He'd sit at the bar mostly—smiling, raising his glass each time I'd end a song, then applaud with earnest appreciation.

"I'm in love with you," he said one night after three vodkas.

But of course, most of the guys who came into the Blue Note were in love with me—every day after work—until they went home. The majority of them worked for IBM when computers were the size of refrigerators, and bragged about the computer industry and how IBM was king. They wore three-piece suits with paisley ties, wing-tip shoes, and Rolex watches. After the first drink, sweat would bead up on their foreheads and trickle down their cheeks. They'd grab a cocktail napkin to sop up the perspiration. Houston's humidity was always a problem, regardless of the season.

No cell phones back then, so the IBM wives would call the club looking for their men who were late for dinner. John, the bartender, fended them off with, "He's already gone," or "Haven't seen him tonight," or "Nobody here by

that name.” Occasionally, Number One Fan would take the call from his spouse and you could hear her screaming into the phone; he just held the receiver and smiled while his vodka-drenched brain took him to Never-Never Land. He’d always say, “I’m leaving now, sweetheart,” hang up and take a puff off his cigarette. Then he’d walk right up to the bandstand in the middle of a song I was singing and stare, smiling that little boy grin with hope in his heart.

My drummer was gay but in the closet. Not many had come out yet. My bass player was heavy-set with a double chin and a third wife. My piano player was a sky diving fool and always showing up with stories from a recent jump: “I almost met my Waterloo this time,” he’d say and have us wide-eyed by the time he got through with his near-death experience—again. But, he could play the hell out of a piano until the “little scotch man” who lived inside him took over his brain.

He was okay until drink number four. After that, you might get his own rendition of “Rhapsody in Blue” or something he had just composed; his dizzy fingers dancing carelessly over the keyboard.

That summer, the owners of the club got word that the strip mall had been sold and would be demolished to make way for a Holiday Inn. Musicians and singers move around a lot, but we’d been here going on five years—we were maintstays and our clientele were regulars. We were only given two weeks’ notice to line up something else.

The last night the club was open, we had a good-bye party. All the IBMers were there along with the rest of the regulars. I took scads of requests, including one from one of the IBMers who was always asking me to “do that one from that movie where Humphrey Bogart tells the piano player to ‘play it again, Sam.’” Of course, I knew he meant “As Time Goes By” from “Casablanca,” and I also knew that “play it again Sam” was not what Bogart said in the movie. Ingrid Bergman said: “Play it once, Sam, for old times’ sake, play ‘As Time Goes By.’” To which Bogart later said: “You played it for her, you can play it for me... If she can stand to listen to it, I can. Play it.” But no use explaining to him or anyone else for that matter. Nobody ever got it right.

There were tears, lots of reminiscing, laughter, drinking, dancing. And then it was closing time. Number One Fan wandered over with a request. He smiled and asked if I knew that new song by Etta James called “At Last.” New, my ass. The masterpiece was written in 1941 by Mark Gordon and Harry Warren and had been recorded by some of the greatest of the greats like Judy Garland, Ella Fitzgerald, Miles Davis and Nat King Cole. But I wasn’t there to give music or movie quote lessons. I was there to entertain. So, for the last song of the evening, I took the mic off its stand, walked off the stage and stood right in front of Number One Fan and sang the song.

I gave him a hug and told him to be sure and drop by and see me at Rudy's on Main where we'd fortunately just secured a six-month contract.

"I love you," he said, and he raised his vodka on the rocks as if making a toast, then blew me a kiss and walked out the door. I never saw him again.

Shortly after the Rudy's gig, the band broke up. My drummer came out of the closet and moved in with his boyfriend; my bass player joined a rock group and moved to Los Angeles, and my piano player—dear, crazy, boozy, loveable guy that he was probably met his Waterloo.

And so time went by, years became decades and night clubs were not the same. Canned music and karaoke had damn near taken over, and real live piano players and singers were scarce. So, just for grins last Saturday evening, I drove into the parking lot in front of the Holiday Inn and sat in my car for about ten minutes, staring at what used to be the Blue Note and how brick and mortar have a way of erasing everything you ever cared about. But I wanted to stand on the spot, feel the energy, maybe get some of the old vibes back.

I walked into the lobby, and found the lounge almost immediately to my left, and was surprised to see a real warm-bodied piano player playing a black baby grand. He was playing an unfamiliar tune, but I took a seat at the bar and tried to hum along. The piano player looked over at me and smiled. I smiled back and ordered a martini.

"What kind?" the bartender asked. "We have an extensive martini menu if you'd like to see it," he added. This was a new era of mixed drinks, with so many concoctions and martini flavors that I took pity on him. "Surprise me," I said, wondering if I would get the real thing or something wild with pomegranate liqueur.

The drink served to me was pale green, sweet and tangy, and tasted like under-baked Key Lime pie. But, I gave a thumbs up to the boyish bartender anyway.

A few minutes later, a couple walked in and sat down next to me—a middle-aged woman with one of those tight-knit perms and a heavy-set bald guy who looked vaguely familiar—maybe one of the old IBMers.

As I sipped my citrusy cocktail, I saw my reflection in the mirror behind the bar. I thought of the smoky-gray, gold-veined mirror at the Blue Note. The phrase "all smoke and mirrors" popped into my head. Cole Porter had deceived me. So had the martini.

I ordered a second drink. "Make it with gin this time," I said. "Straight up."