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The TRANZAC and Social Problems re: COVID 19 and Performing Musicians

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Article abstract

Exploring COVID-19 through the TRANZAC, a Toronto performance hub. This piece is in the form of a zine.

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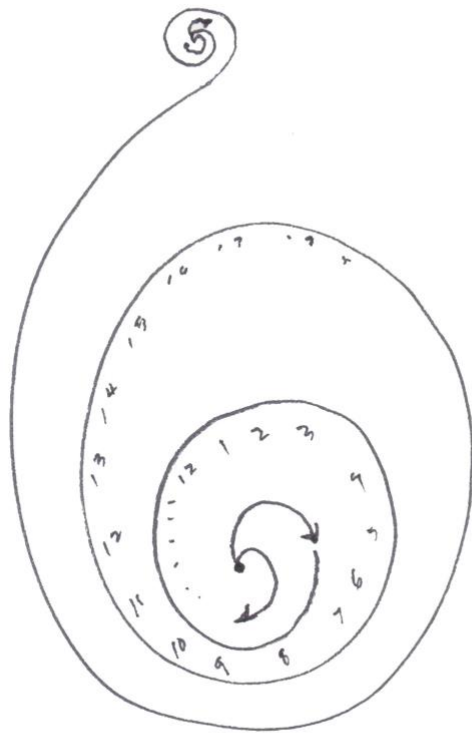
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TIME LINE
OF
COVID

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The TRANZAC and social problems

re: COVID 19 and performing musicians

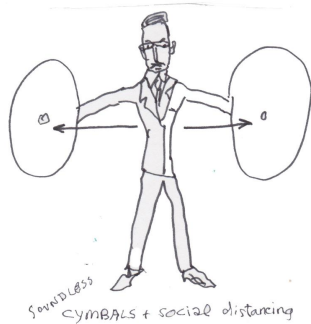


by Bob Wiseman
illustrations by Gail Geltner

page one

This Zine explores the existential questions between musicians, board members, and consultants regarding the Toronto performance space “The Tranzac” and how/ whether it survives the halting of public gatherings and other related restrictions stemming from COVID-19.

Since IICSI celebrates improvisational engagement, these materials are verbatim, cut up, random or improvised.



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I just had a nice conversation with Ronley Tepper. She was a good person to talk to. On the one hand, I think we're going to be more grateful about getting together for cultural activities. There will be more appreciation about being together, in whatever capacity, in real life. You know, it will just mean a lot to us and the spaces that continue to exist, that survive and that are open after this. People will be valuable to people. But I also think it's not like the government is going to say, "Okay the venues can open again now" and then the next day we are going to open and it's going to be like before. No, it is not. Like, it's not going to be like before ever. It is going to be a long long recovery that way. I think there will be a wariness to be in crowded places.

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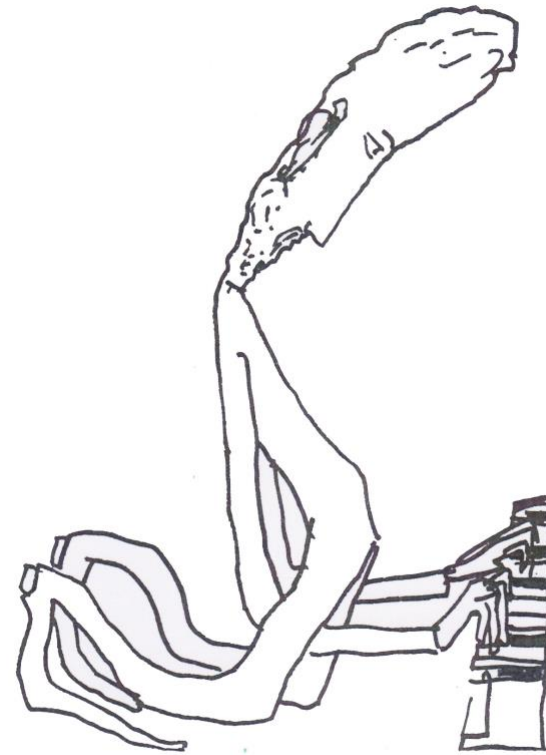
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One thing that distinguishes The Tranzac is that we own the building, which helps provide

us with some stability as a not-for-profit corporation. We do not pay taxes, except for HST, and in our capacity as a theatre with under 1,000 seats, the City of Toronto has exempted us from property taxes.



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Sarah Greene

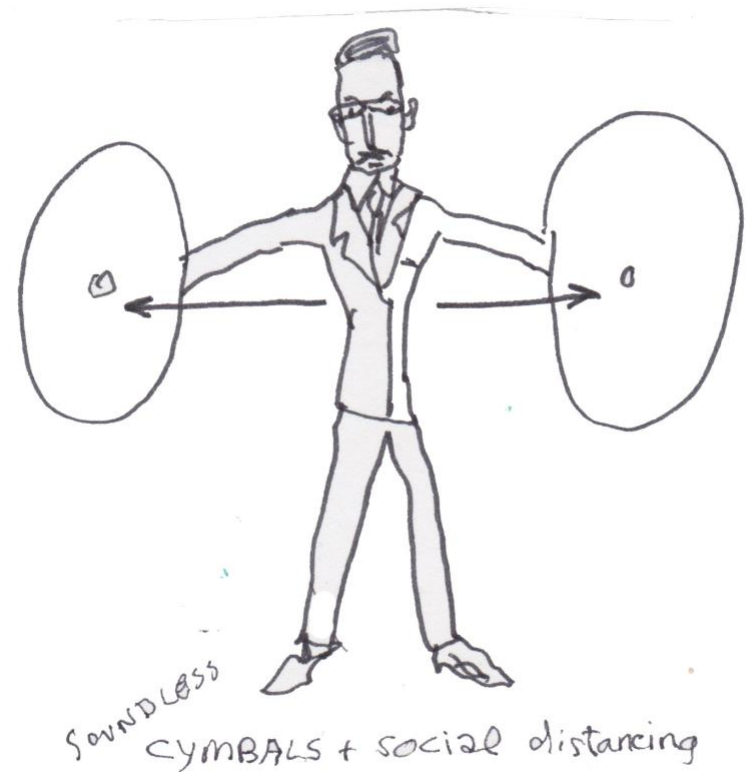
the Booker

Well, I mean I'm still hoping that this is like a temporary situation and like the building that we know will be in operation again. It might take a year. I think it's like a few things, like this was definitely an emphasis to do something that a lot of other venues were already better at. To engage with our community and to build community online as well as in person. Even before the pandemic there were circumstances where people expressed an interest or desire for us to stream our shows so, if they were not able to be there in person that they could still watch. Array Music was doing that. They were streaming pretty much most of their shows

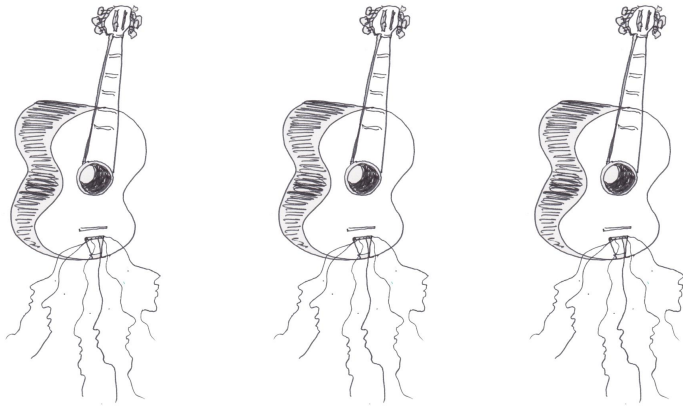
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going to the space.
you could watch from home.
And I guess I was like
a little bit of a luddite
about all of this beforehand,
a little resistant
because I figured
that not everybody
wanted cameras in their face
all the time. Because
there are some folk venues,
that just sort of filmed everybody
and put it on Facebook but
without really asking proper permission
like there's different ways to do
this kind of thing.
I know with Hugh's room,
they would negotiate
like offer to do a board recording of your show.
If it had "buy in" from the artist,
I totally support that.
But I didn't want to be in a situation
where we were pressuring everybody
to be online
all the time
because I think there is something magical
about how ephemeral
live performances are.
Yeah, the idea of having
absolutely everything
up on YouTube forever
does not seem like a good idea to me.

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Page thirty-four

TWO TRANZAC STORIES

who else would it be?

I played a piano song at the Tranzac open stage. People applauded. I asked, did I play too much? (because usually people do two songs, but I might have played too long), a woman at the bar said, do eight more. The host told me it would be fine to do one more. I started one more but heard someone loudly talking as though the music is in the way of their conversation. An annoying stumbling block for improvising. I looked up; it was the woman who said do eight more.

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genes Overgrown ivy on the outside walls, now squirrel babies running around the attic. Awkward moving a 25 ft ladder by myself and cut 3 of my fingers deeply. Trying to cut the ivy and trying to set up a one-way door and then seal the opening to the unadvertised penthouse suite. Went to the Joe Hall tribute show at the Tranzac. I noticed when his son sang, he had Joe's voice. Everyone enjoyed the eeriness of genes. I played an encore one time with the Wallflowers; I could not see Jakob Dylan for whoever he actually is. Probably if I knew him for more than 5 minutes on stage I would, but during that encore all I could see was the genes. Is my daughter's future life a songwriter or an independent squirrel remover with band-aid hands?



There was a time when people in music stores wanted to impress me with the latest imitation piano sound and it never did, until the day it did. Someone cracked the code and then it was perfect. Subsequently, I used lots of sampled pianos. More than one knowledgeable musician complimented my piano recording when in fact it was not a real piano. The reasons I used the sampled sounds were convenience. No microphones, no labour to find the perfect spot, no inconsistent tuning or inconsistent piano quality, plus being a midi recording transpositions could be made with a click. Surreal levels of control.

In recent years I prefer to record the real upright over sampled Bösendorfer. Maybe because my studio is at the Tranzac and there are 3 pianos there. It's more work but it is more fun. I realize now when all is said and done there are obvious problems using virtual reality. Part of me has to pretend I am not playing a sampled sound and another part of me has to pretend to not notice that I am not supposed to notice. That is two parts pretending instead of all of me completing the task at hand. Quicker method to play notes made by hammers hitting strings and I can give 100% to that easy.

Haikus salvaged from interviews

[sarah]
**Do not want online
I think this is magical
Our community**

[nick]
**The economics
I'm pretty ambivalent
capitalism**

[ruth]
**we need to rent spaces
southern cross or main hall
where is government**

[john]
**not any better
web is worse for musicians
it's like a mortgage**

JOHN SOBOL, (web developer, musician,
consultant for the Tranzac re: accessing the Canada
Council Digital Strategy Fund)



Okay, first of all, really awesome questions.

“What inequities in the performing arts have been exacerbated by the pandemic and what forms might an equitable recovery take?” So, you might not be surprised, having read my stuff, that I think the main inequity that it highlights is... well there’s actually a few.

One is the internet... it's not any better at the moment a place for musicians to make money than, say, the record industry was, arguably even worse. If such a thing was possible.

It's kind of unbelievable, you know, (laughs) we have devised a world in which there is something worse for musicians than the music industry as we know it.

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Piano for real1987

, in the studio with Terry

Brown and Juno-award winning engineer Mike Jones, Bruce Hornsby’s song ‘That’s the Way It Is’ comes over the air waves during a break. A popular song then, and a conversation between the two studio veterans transpires regarding how good it sounds for a sampled instrument. Cannot help overhearing some of their discussion. “You were saying the piano isn’t real?” They answer, yes, it is a sample. Absolutely not a real piano. I listen too, and I’m a pianist – I decide they’re nuts.

By then I was also prejudiced, had worked off and on for at least a year with Terry whose claim to fame was producing Rush and I was allergic to Rush. Who knows, maybe Terry wasn’t into Rush either? The opinions of Terry and Mike lingered with me a long time because they were professionals and so confident, even arrogant, that the Bruce Hornsby piano wasn’t natural. I realized a few years later, after many recordings of pianos myself, that probably they were right. Your ears change from getting up close and personal with microphones and recording.

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MICHAEL BOOTH (Jazz FM manager and Tranzac board member, former President)

The problem is your hard costs, staff, electricity, crew. You're cutting your Revenue. We're trying to figure out what this model could be. I don't believe online is going to cut it. It's a band-aid. People want live experience. I'm sure you don't want to never perform live again (laughs). I think about younger musicians who are just starting out like the two kids who live in the basement of the big house I live in. They are finishing Humber, they are not jazz musicians per se, and she teaches a lot, and she does some music therapy, and that's a whole other thing. So, she's able to do some online teaching, but you know, they're a couple of kids who have a song writing combo that they are going out with every summer and they toured for a couple of months in a van down east across the country. But when the emergency programs run out... You know the government's promised half of a billion dollars through cultural industries, but I haven't seen any of it yet. That includes sport as well. That's not a very big pie to divvy up. I'm hearing rumours. Basically, kybosh touring for a very long time. Not just music but theatre. And that industry that employs a ton of people in this town. And never mind film & TV. These are the last people that are going to get their jobs back, right? Yet they're retailers like anybody else. My theory and amateur analysis: it's a lot easier for people to get fixated on things. Maybe there are good things about that. They were not just overloaded with all this stimulus that's grabbing your attention all the time. But we've kind of forgotten how to concentrate on something in a positive way. I think people, when they don't have that stimulus, they don't have anyone to talk about it. I can't walk away and say fuck it, go to the bar, or go out and do what they would do or socialize or say screw it. I'm going to meet a couple people and have a drink or go to the Tranzac. **Page thirty**

Take a letter Maria



Made it to the Tranzac's open stage Monday evening. Finally filmed Maria Kasstan singing her song about the lack of accountability in the Toronto Police Department following her husband's heart attack outside their offices and how they didn't come to his assistance because they thought he was homeless. Who wants to touch a homeless person? Not those with the slogan to serve and protect. Julian Fantino would not dignify her request for an interview to discuss lack of accountability, so she wrote the song 'Phantom Fantino'.

<https://vimeo.com/375579469>

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NICK FRASER (drummer, recording artist)

Well, for me the Tranzac is a beautiful sounding room.

I really love playing there.

All my friends play there.

I just love the community there.

I'm pretty ambivalent about online concerts so far.

You know what I mean?

I hope that small-scale live performance comes back sooner than, say, sports events.

I don't understand why live music is being blanketed as one activity.

We're sort of at the mercy of someone else's conception of what live music is.

I get the economics of the Tranzac and the small-scale Southern Cross gigs with ten people in the audience.

That's not what keeps the gears going, right?

I get that.

Geddy Kruger

I was hosting the Tranzac open stage last night, filling in for Sarah who had a headache. There is a guy who goes by Geddy Krüger who must attend every week because I do not get here often but each time he is here. And each time he plays something by Nomeansno. It is surprising and fantastic, partly because he was born in the 80s and partly because it plops me back into 1990-ish attending Nomeansno shows in Toronto – as did anyone who was anyone. They were the cutting edge. Geddy Krüger plays an acoustic bass, the kind one plays with a strap around the neck like an acoustic guitar. He slaps loud dynamic bass figures à la Rob Wright and recites the lyrics with insight, sarcasm, and pride. The other night he said something critical about notes he missed, and I thought to myself, does he really think anyone here knows the music he's referencing well enough to understand if there was an error? Of course not. Nobody here knows Nomeansno but damn I wish Alistair or Lisa or Corrine or Brian or anyone I used to know who also loved Rob and John Wright knew about Geddy Krüger on Monday nights at the Tranzac open stage.

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remembered all the words

I've seen all the Michael Holingsworth plays; I enjoy them immensely. One time I insulted an actor without realizing it at a little party for everyone upstairs after the performance was done. In these plays about Canadian history – told from a left, feminist, indigenous perspective that illuminate where the church was, where the money was, where the army was, told in a zillion quick scenes one after the next after the next – all the actors play 6 or 7 characters and the props are paper mâché objects larger than life, the lighting is surprising. The music is usually by Brent Snyder who I knew a little bit in the 80s. It sounds mostly like one synthesizer from that era and adds another layer of unique – a lot is going on. The actor was an old acquaintance and I wanted to say something nice. I shared how amazed I was with how much text they have to memorize and he said something in return very sarcastic as if my compliment was worthless. The next days I thought about that and realized I wasn't saying anything about his acting. Yep, pointless.

Last night I played a set at the Tranzac. Someone approached after to tell me I play real fast and they were really impressed by how fast I play, it is so blurry. I realize when someone says something like that, they think they are demonstrating some understanding, but it makes me only shift away. They are impressed I remembered all the words instead of anything about what was done with the words.

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I don't want to start ranting about the music industry, but I mean, I always thought of it as something that I am separate from.

I'm operating in a... and, you know, that is a personal fantasy of mine, you know what I mean?

A fantasy world where I do not engage.

I just try to operate somewhat outside of the music industry.

If that makes sense?

I guess the type of activity that I play, and particularly at the Tranzac, really does not transfer well to a digital space.

I love recorded music but there are certain art forms that are necessarily 'in person,' in the room, and that's the form of this work.

If you don't have that it becomes something else.

I think the same thing is true of recordings.

I have definitely been stuck. Part of it is that I was having major problems with tendonitis in my body.

So, at first it was kind of like a blessing in disguise.

I lost all my work.

Had like four tours cancelled.

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Also, in terms of money, I always think of the Tranzac as the incubator.

Maybe we make \$40 or something at the Tranzac, it's not a big money-maker.

Like, capitalism already took our technology, already took the ways to make money in music.

I mean, the sale of recorded music... It has been totally devalued; it doesn't even register anymore.

And I thought, oh I actually get to do some real recovery and rest and that is going to be really good.

Then I keep thinking maybe September will happen.

And then there is all stuff that has been moved by a year, but we do not know what is going to happen in a year.

Comedy is something to think about.

Not that it is impossible to make something funny by yourself in front of your computer.

But without that basic feedback of a laugh, you really do not know how your work is landing.

Maybe it's harder to figure out in general with abstract improvised music how your work is landing.

My preference would be to make something.

Make a video.

(continued)

There has been a couple of things on my street. A friend of mine is a stilt walker and he has a Brazilian drum troop on stilts. So, they have been picking little spots in the neighbourhood and they came up our street and did a walk-around one time, and someone was walking with a hat but nobody has any cash, so there was not anything for them, but they said whether you have it or not we're just here to lift your spirits and just have some fun. And then last night I heard a New Orleans marching band at the end of the street. So, I went down the street. It was in a backyard; somebody's birthday and they hired this six- or seven-piece band, and it was fantastic and I wondered, are they paying the band or are the band friends of theirs? It reminded me of an old barn dance, you just had musicians that would come, and they just played, I don't know if they got paid or just got off on providing the entertainment. There's that level. I don't know on a performance level, how can you get that feeling when you're sitting in a room - [*meaning playing without an audience via Zoom, Skype etc.*] If you were going to improvise in a small hall or something that would be awesome but how would it feel if you just did it alone at home with a camera? There has got to be a lot more grants to help out. Unfortunately, it's all about money. People got to be handing out the money.

Ruth Wilford (board member)

I can see that there would be an end in sight. If this goes on for two years, we're screwed. I do not understand why we're where we are. I think we're holding out for the government to provide assistance, but I feel like we need to rent some space. That's what we do all the time anyway right? We rent it to performers. The building itself costs us money, the building itself is going to have to make some money in order to survive.

I've watched a few of the open mics. The digital stuff is tricky. It all depends on the audience. They need to buy the tickets, put the money in the tip jar or buy the virtual beer, it has got to be easy. The Orbit Room just closed. Once we have the place open again, we have got the market cornered (laughs) because everybody else has gone out of business. We have this giant building. We could be having shows in the Main Hall that are filmed, we could be in the Southern Cross, there are spaces that we could be in and if we can't serve customers in that building, we should be renting out large portions of that building. Maybe someone with a mail order business for six months who just wants to have a warehouse space.

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DAVE EADY TREASURER

Dave: I'm not sure how much use I can be not being a musician but... it certainly is a very stressful time for everybody. I mean, every day we get bombarded with different information. Today's news is maybe you won't have to go through the second time. They're becoming more pessimistic about when we're going to get a vaccine. And we've got people starting to open things up on a moderate scale. It's total confusion. It's very hard on people because you really cannot begin to make plans. Everybody is isolated, we all want to start doing something. We have had a lot of interesting discussions. To go to some of your points, I think the online stuff is great. The problem is it's really hard to monetize it. It is almost like we need a platform like Zoom - but with a built-in monetization factor. If you know any software developer? If there was something where people can join you in the conversation and do a quick contribution with a credit card or PayPal.



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What's a Tranzac?

As COVID-19 emerged, the board had to take quick action. When the first person said we're going to have to close, nobody agreed with her. This was about a week before everything closed. I remember wondering, what does that mean and is it even possible for the Tranzac to close? And so, we proceeded to change. Our board meetings moved to the Zoom world and, as conversations turned to whether or not to remain open, one of our members advocated for us not to close. He acted like it was a passing fad, but then it happened in a larger national level and we all realized we'd have to close right now. Then we had to sort out what to do for the staff of the Tranzac, let alone musicians. It later took the form of judgment because our staff are not privy to the board meetings. Some of them thought they were being abandoned. One of the board members quit, which is what people do when their emotions are frazzled. She thought we were not moving fast enough for the staff, though it was the difference between making a decision on Monday vs. Thursday.

Some of Tranzac board in a Zoom meeting



**MEETING OF TRANZAC BOARD OF DIRECTORS
March 30, 2020**

1. Call to Order & regrets
2. Gratitude
3. Adoption of minutes
4. Business Arising - Let us go through the list from March 16th minutes and get whatever updates are available
5. Dave to provide update from Paul
6. Current state of the board
7.

Staying afloat
8. Assistance for staff
9. Hugh's Room
10. New business
11. Adjournment

There was a time when people in music stores wanted to impress me with the latest imitation piano sound and it never did, until the day it did. Someone cracked the code and then it was perfect. Subsequently, I used lots of sampled pianos. More than one knowledgeable musician complimented my piano recording when in fact it was not a real piano. The reasons I used the sampled sounds were convenience. No microphones, no labour to find the perfect spot, no inconsistent tuning or inconsistent piano quality. Plus, being a midi recording, transpositions could be made with a click. Surreal levels of control.

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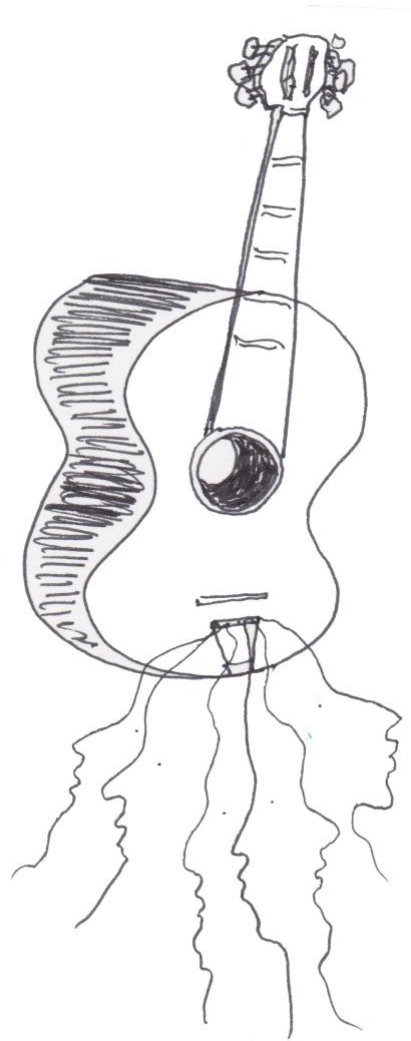
Lannie Petrushka

Graffiti from Tranzac bathroom

His name is Lannie Petrushka.
Always at the open stage in the 1980s at Fat Alberts, tinkering on the piano before the regulars arrived. Seemed not a pianist because the way he touched the keys was overly careful, like they might be too hot to touch. He was in his 40s, dressed in clothes that didn't fit him and never spoke to anyone but more memorable were the loud sighs or short bursts of laughter at inappropriate moments, in the middle of a quiet song or a compelling story. Angry looks from strangers

did not have **18**

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their desired effect. He sat at the front and left for the evening following the break. I liked the tension between performers and him for his inconsiderations. Often people were quiet when I played my piano pieces. I was a peculiar addition to the line up of mostly guitar singer songwriters. I was not distracted by his unexpected sounds because he was oblivious, what is the point? Having worked in group homes, my intuition said he lived somewhere like that and this was a weekly night out, some free entertainment before curfew. Yesterday, he walked by me on the subway, incredible, last seen in 1989.

Flood of memories. The odds are such that this chance sighting will be the last time I ever see this guy, who I do not know, yet do. Got up and walked down to where he took a seat, wondered if he can communicate or if he would remember me. There was a seat open next to him. I sat down and asked him, "Do you still play the piano?" He recognized me immediately and held out his hand.

“Lannie Petrushka. Yes, if I can find one, but mostly accordion now. I transcribe romantic piano music for accordion.”

I never knew he spoke English or played accordion or understood theory.

Told him Mary stopped hosting, Bram died, Sam died, Doug died and Ray too.

“Did Larkin die from a physical condition?” he asked.

I thought to myself, everyone dies from a physical condition.

Told him Fat Alberts moved to the Steelworkers Hall every Wednesday night and there is another good open stage at the Tranzac on Mondays.

“Do they charge money?”

“No, and they have a piano and you could even play accordion if you want.”

His eyes looked away while I spoke, as though his attention was on other subjects, as if I never sat down in the first place. That was more in keeping with my memory of him.

So was the beige trench coat, navy blue flood pants, brown dress shoes, 50s hair cut – nothing changed but wrinkles. He must be 75-ish. “Did you stick with the piano? Did you ever go places with it?”

“I stuck with it.” I said.

“You played experimental, the world moves on from the romantics, melodic music is sweet but you know the female spider eats the males after they screw.”

“I’ve heard about that”.

“Sweetness is overrated.”

“Right.”

“It is natural but so are volcanic eruptions and lava swallowing every scream it can embrace.”

“Right.”

“I like lava like winter, they are the reset buttons.”

“I know what you mean.”

He got off at St. George without saying goodbye. I liked this ending better than if I remained in my seat.