

## Take the Ice Road to the Island

When we visited Bayfield, Wisconsin some time ago, I remember reading about an adventure involving the winter ice on Lake Superior and the moving of a whole house. The plan was to wait until the ice was as thick as it could probably grow, then slowly skate a whole house on sled blades two miles across from the mainland to a nearby island. It had been done before apparently, but people seemed to think this plan might be a bit risky. Ice fishermen, cars, trucks, and those little ice houses had been going out on the ice for years with no consequences. But the newspaper articles of the time, from quite a long while ago, explained (with photos) the whole endeavor, as that pretty house slid a mile out toward the large nearby island, where a number of other houses already stood. When the ice gave way and the whole house and the tow trucks disappeared into the deep, it was an amazing sight. All the workers escaped, but the house was swallowed up.

I was thinking about this event when I was asked to drive my car out onto the ice of Lake Minnetonka, following the vehicle of the guy who wanted me to tune the piano for a family member who lived on an island nearly a mile away. This was the first time I had tried that, and I felt a little nervous about it. Thousands of adventuresome souls drive on the ice every year, but this was my maiden voyage. The home was one of about a dozen that were safely standing on the land in splendid natural isolation. I gathered that boat travel was the most common mode of access to these houses, but during certain periods of winter, when the ice houses gathered out beyond the island's point, it was perfectly safe to drive cars there. This mode of transportation was quicker and more efficient in deep winter than motor boats in summer. A winding road led across the lake, the image worn into the ice by tires from frequent traffic. It must be safe, I figured. The lead driver assured me that there was nothing to worry about.

We arrived without incident, but my heart rate had elevated. We parked by the boat launch/dock area and hiked in about 80 yards on a footpath that ascended through a forest of dramatic bare branches. I carried my tuning box with me, and soon, after a turn in the path, we came upon a very picturesque house from about 1920. My recollection has painted a picture of gingerbread decorations around the front door. The late-60s widow who lived there alone came out to greet us with a smile; she was the man's aunt and he was gifting her some much-needed piano care. By pre-arrangement, she had lunch on for us, with tasty hot-beef sandwiches and cocoa. This remarkably independent woman was a real naturalist, who, when drawn out, had some expansive ideas about environmental and scientific subjects that most people never hear about. I had noticed an animal pen as I came near the house, empty at the time. I asked her if she possibly kept goats during the warm months, and she launched into a colorful description of her three 'darlings', who were staying the cold months at a boarding farm nearby. At the lunch table I mentioned to her that I had heard of a scientific experiment that involved using goats to cultivate in their systems some sort of medicine that people could use to treat a rare malady of the blood stream?—or some internal organs, maybe, I don't remember (could it be a chemical that clears a person's memory? I could use that.) She laughed at that revelation, new to her, and commented happily that finally modern science has found a way to put goats to use.

The piano itself was sadly neglected, and in need of not only a tuning but some repair of the soundboard, which had developed some remarkable cracks in the annual dry winter season (wood stoves are terrible for piano soundboards, I've found). We hunted around the work area of her dearly departed husband (probably mostly untouched for ten years), looking for an electric drill,

some drill bits and some appropriately-sized screws. On old pianos, the separated ribs of the soundboard can be carefully pinned down to stop the buzzing sounds, helping the piano to resonate properly when played. We found everything I needed, but the drill bits were rusty and had not been touched for a long time. Nonetheless they still functioned. The repairs yielded moderate success, and the piano sounded fairly normal once the tuning was done. I recommended that she put a big jar of water in the bottom of the piano, beside the pedal levers, to keep more humidity in the piano during the winter.

It was a sweet encounter for me. This bright woman, and her cheerful nephew who paid for all my work, made my time there go easily. Interesting people really can make life more stimulating, and as I headed my car down the ice road back to shore (no need for a guide anymore) I thought about how rich and rewarding this kind of profession can really be. Thank you, lucky stars.

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### **To Let: Cozy Attic, Breezy Open Space w/Multi Code Violations**

At the appointed time and day, not knowing anything about what to expect, I entered the ghostly old brick structure, a cross between an apartment building and an office complex, found the stairs and began my climb. The first three floors had a wild network of hallways that split off from the stairway, leading to irregular spaces large and small behind rows of under-labeled doors. For all I know, each floor had an opium den somewhere, and a mad scientist, and a trader of illegal items from exotic places. After the third floor the stairway narrowed and appeared less trodden-upon. Beyond the last mid-way turn in the steps, the final flight delivered me into a giant open space, no doors, dividers, or even any walls, really, just the high underside of the roof. This area turned out to be the attic for the entire multi-room warehouse, probably 50 or 60 feet long, with windows only at the front and back ends where dormers were built in.

Half of the gigantic room was obviously where the band practiced (drums, amps, speakers, and lots of equipment boxes were scattered around), while the other half, toward the front of the building, appeared to be Brian's living area. Without any walls to separate the attic into 'rooms', each floor space had to be implied, just as an audience attending a stage play in a theater understands what's being suggested to them. The 'living room' had a couch and a battered rocking chair facing a worn-out Persian carpet, the 'kitchen' featured a rickety table with a two-burner hotplate, a cabinet with dishes and pots, an apartment-size fridge which chugged whenever it was running, and a janitor's industrial tub near the roof slant, which served as the kitchen sink. Piles of other items like canned food, tattered books and ragged clothes enclosed each room's floor area, helping to define more clearly this strange stage set. It was kind of a magical scene; each living zone relied entirely on people's imaginations to create a feeling of what each space was for.

My friend Brian was the bass player in a hard-driving rock band that was well-known and popular enough to be getting a gig just about every weekend, sometimes more than one. It was a five-piece band (sax, guitar, piano, bass, drums, many of whom also sang) that had a rehearsal studio atop this old and creaky brick structure somewhere in Southeast Minneapolis, a part of town that is mostly 'middle class residential,' but across the street the next block abruptly switches to industrial tracts on many sides. Brian's building was on the edge between a

residential swath and about a mile of industrial near-wasteland. Some buildings seemed abandoned and others were rented out cheaply to anyone who wanted to use the offices and studios for any crazy reason at all. The band's practice space was among many dingy, mysterious spaces used for hard-to-define purposes in this weathered four-story brick building that had seen its better days about 70 years ago.

During the early days of the West Bank School of Music, which I launched in 1970, there was a blossoming music scene around the University of Minnesota, including the West Bank neighborhood, downtown and in 'Southeast' Minneapolis, all areas adjacent to the U of M. As the director of WBSM during the first 14 years, I became well acquainted with many performing musicians, especially within the styles of music considered non-classical, like folk, bluegrass, jazz, rock, and blues music. The Twin Cities gave rise to several popular bands during that time, and some went on the more than local stardom.

Brian wanted me to come over to see what I could do about the band's practice piano. It was having multiple troubles that the piano player didn't know how to resolve, especially keys that wouldn't play any more. I was given the address and told that once I got in the main door off the street, I should turn right to the end of the hall and climb the stairs, and just keep going. The building did not have any elevator, so everyone that wanted anything in their spaces, like desks, chairs, cabinets, vats for mixing stuff, electronic equipment (which was all huge and bulky back then), séance tables, etc. had to bodily carry them up those stairs to their various lairs and business establishments. At least the stairway was solid and wide enough for anything people wanted to bring in or out. When I asked Brian later if the band's equipment had to be hauled up and down those four flights of switch-back staircase whenever they played somewhere, he said with a wan smile, "Yup, every damn time." That may help explain why all five guys were so lean.

There is an old Cheech and Chong movie where those two marijuana fiends were trying to dream up a new way to smuggle some weed across the Mexican border. They visited some friends at a sort of factory somewhere in Mexico where they fashioned (if I recall) new fenders and a bumper for their truck made entirely of marijuana. As luck would have it, the border guards stopped them (even though the truck looked convincingly like any other one) and brought them over to a little building where their drug-snuffing dog was let loose on the truck. After everyone argued back and forth for a little while, Cheech glanced over and was suddenly alarmed to see the hapless dog lying immobilized on his back with all four legs sticking straight up in the air. He obviously had been overwhelmed by what he had sniffed. I can't help but think that if any Minneapolis housing inspector accidentally ventured into that attic, he too would be knocked flat, with his arms and legs straight up in the air, by the scope and magnitude of the code violations that assaulted him. He probably would not have enough pages on his scattered clipboard of tattered forms to document and describe all the things wrong with the electricity, plumbing, hazards, escape routes, and on and on. I have a feeling it may have been a record-setting illegal living space.

The 'bedroom' was placed within the large dormer at the front of the attic, with slanting roof sections psychologically enclosing the space by the open window. A dresser with pulled-out drawers (clothes hanging out) was pushed up to one roof side, while stacks of clothes wrapped

around two sides of the mattress on the floor. At the top of the stairs about 25 feet away, I called out, "Hello?"

After about 20 seconds, some rustling in the sheets finally gave rise to Brian's creaky voice. "What? Who's that?"

I called back, "It's Warren. Here to work on the piano." I felt a little awkward. "You up yet?"

Brian yelled back, this time more cheerfully, "Hey, hi! Oh, yeah! Shit, is it 11 o'clock already? Wow. Come on in!" He jumped out of bed as I threaded my way over into his living room. He appeared taller and leaner than me, I noticed right away (things I had not really noticed before). He reminded me of some old paintings of Jesus, with his long hair and bushy beard (which matched mine at that time), only homelier, and with an important distinction that seemed different than all the Jesus portraits I'd seen, which I'll get to shortly. Jesus flashed a half-smile. "Glad you could make it. Hope you've got some tricks up your sleeve. That piano needs some serious help!"

At that point, the bed sheets moved again and were tossed aside in a ruffled mess. A smallish, athletic college-age woman emerged, sort of stretched, and clumsily brushed her hair out of her eyes. I wondered at the time if she might be an aspiring professional dancer. "Hey!" Brian brightened up, gesturing. "This is my wife, Annie." Then he turned to her and explained, "Warren's here to pull our piano back from the brink!"

"Cool." She smiled at me and strolled off towards the other end of the attic, a long way off, towards the only space that actually had walls and a door, I noticed for the first time. This was the tiny bathroom they had, which saved them having to run down the stairs to some general 'public' toilet the other tenants in the building must be using. An interesting feature of this bathroom was the old claw-foot tub sitting on the floor outside of it, with umbilical tubes (hot and cold water, drain) joining it to the plumbing inside the biffy through a rough-cut hole in the side of the wall. The tub must have come from some salvage place, and struggled up those four flights of stairs, with the whole band's help, one claw-foot at a time. It looked pretty rough, but apparently it still held water. Someone had painted flames on the outside, licking up from the bottom so it looked like the cannibal's cooking pot.

"Head on over to the piano." Brian gestured toward practice space. "I'll be right there." The most unusual aspect of this whole tableau thus far was that only *one* of us had any clothes on at all. But in the casual, non-uptight spirit of the times, we all ignored that and went on with our interaction. This is the important distinction I mentioned between Brian and general Jesus paintings. Even including all of the religious medieval art I viewed and marveled at in various European cathedrals later in life, I never have come across one canvas where Jesus is painted in the nude. Lots of other people, sure, but not him.

As I began shifting various strange items off the piano, Brian reappeared by my side, fully clothed after only a minute. Annie returned from the bathroom a short while later wearing a beige oversized T-shirt with a band logo on it. She set to work in the 'kitchen,' and soon came

over by me too, asking if wanted to 'be in on' the scrambled eggs. I said, no thanks, I just had my cereal before I came.

The piano was a tall upright, very ancient, battered and scarred. In fact I wondered if it might have been something like an Egyptian slave early on (in a former life?), forced to help build the pyramids a few thousand years ago. This piano must have suffered a lot of beatings and abuse over a long period of time. Even though it had been painted cheerful, now faded, psychedelic colors, it appeared forlorn and spent. One of the back casters had disappeared and a loose chunk of wood was stuck there in its place, giving the piano a tilted look, like it was still rocking with the ocean swells inside the pirate ship it was travelling on. It had been played hard, I could tell. Beside the scars from its slave floggings, it had at least a dozen torturous burn marks where lit cigarettes had been stuck on the edge of the top, or on the end blocks by the keys, and left to burn out.

After removing (with Brian's help) all the pages of musical scribbled notes and lyrics, snack waste, dead and slimed coffee cups, a dinner plate loaded with cigarette butts, and other various paraphernalia, and got the piano's top folded back, I was able to extricate the music rack and give the patient its full exam. "It's not good," I told Brian in my best doctoral voice, shaking my head sadly. "But I'll try to get the worst of the broken things working again." Luckily I had with me in my big tool box some crucial supplies that might just help.

I remember about three decades ago, at another house, a young husband and wife were worrying over their home's old upright piano, which had a few keys that were completely disabled for no reason they understood. Once again, the piano tech wizard (I mean me) was able to save the day. After the music rack came off, we all could see a couple of the problem areas. I picked up a broken whippen (a crucial part needed to make the key play at all) that had flopped askew, out of place, still slightly attached to its colleagues within the piano action.

I acted as the wise and knowledgeable specialist. "This is what is called a *broken part*." The young guy then made us laugh when he said, in perfect deadpan style, "Um, could you put that in *layman's* terms?" I guess there's no way to break that explanation down more.

This ancient instrument before me could have been featured in some Egyptian pictographs showing how to put things back in place once they flew apart. Archeologists probably have puzzled over the hidden meaning of these cryptic images for millennia already, but I'd understand what they meant right away.

I explained to Brian that there were several parts that had been snapped apart inside the action by his piano player's fierce playing style. "Yeah, Jack's a monster. He's always bashing away at this thing." I told him I would do what I could for it. After about two hours of meticulous repairs, the replacement of pieces from my toolkit and rifling parts from the less-used high and low ends of the keyboard, I was able tune the beast and return it to (more or less) playable condition. Brian was all smiles and claimed that Jack would be 'super happy' at rehearsal that afternoon.

I wished him luck, and next saw Brian a few nights later on a gloomy stage somewhere before four hundred screaming rock fans, including me. My ears still ring.

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