

Kartok not Bartok

OK, here goes, another edition of writer-without-a-clue. As I said in my previous paper, I'm a better listener for lots of reasons. I guess those crackerjack holiday programs I've put together don't count as a presentation, even though the program of a little show like that does hold elements of literary skill, such as form, pacing, flow, *hochtpunts* and *denouement* appropriately placed. Whatever. There's no use dwelling on it. You guys want to see a little blood, sweat and tears....well at least a little sweat (great early 70's horn band by the way).

So, I came up with what I thought was a nifty subject over a year ago. I've allowed it to percolate, find form. I've made a mental outline and, to all you guys out there who've said this and to all of you rookies who've yet to present, having an idea, title, or outline isn't the magic pill. And even though the phrase "after I got my title the paper just wrote itself" is a figure of speech, it is also, of course, total horse shit.

Though I had what I thought was a great subject, with a built-in form, I'd been thinking a little about the character, Shorty, from my first paper and how I should be developing his story, finding new things for Shorty to do. But this new subject has won the day, even though some of the stories imbedded in this paper seem mundane and even tedious, especially in light of the fantastic papers of late. I also want some of you classical music and other music aficionados out there in the club to know that eventually I'll get to writing what Bob Kaltof (rest his soul) had stated in his recommendations for me to the club, that I would write about music, especially historical, well-researched stories about little-known composers and musicians.

I want Stan, Walter, and James to know that there are papers a-plenty on obscure composers and musicians with mysterious backgrounds and circumstances; who died destitute or ignominiously. (Gesualdo comes to mind.) But those stories will have to wait. As Jim said the other night, whether we like it or not, the ego eventually takes over and these presentations become autobiographical.

This paper being mostly so, I was pleasantly surprised when I realized that my reading was the night of the club elections, knowing that a paper of light weight and brevity, like a long budget, might be the ticket for this evening's presentation...control of time being a forte and compulsion of mine.

A few weeks ago, standing in the dinner line after an especially good paper on the Mendelssohn family by Stanley Troup, Lew Gatch nailed me on what I thought was a cute title for tonight's paper, "Kartok not Bartok?.....must be like Click and Clack".

Well,.....kinda.....

I am now 51 years old and although we have no control over the time and place of our births, I believe I was born at a fortunate time. Most of my grade school days were spent down in the rural south in what would be considered today, impoverished conditions. And, as a late Baby Boomer, I've had the opportunity to have observed an edge of what may be called "the American Car Culture". To have lived from a point when one could tell the identity of a specific model of car coming around the corner from only its sound --- a time when, at least in my family, everyone worked on their cars! In fact from the late '50's to the early '70's, it seems to me, standing around an open hood in the driveway with a can of beer and a few buddies, was a rite of passage, a common

experience, a place where stories were exchanged and hyperbole was as much standard fare as the fishing lake. In fact those and other tales coalesced while staring down at that engine or wheel well or rear-end differential or transmission or whatever. This was a place of men and it was important to somehow be a part of it.

Unfortunately for me, my sensibilities were never really there and in my early grade school years, I would much rather spend time in the kitchen making stuff with my mom. I may elaborate on that sad tale later.

It also seems to me that this aforementioned rite of passage of sorts has gone by the wayside and is a part of the by-gone years...something nostalgic.

There are many factors to the demise of this rite. It may be now, or may have always been, a class, regional, time, historical, rural versus urban, socio-economic issue. And in that may be other papers to be written by you scholars and brainiacs in the club. Another undeniable reason for the demise is the growing complexity of the modern automobile. Cars used to be relatively easy to work on. There was more room under the hood (before computers, AC, power-steering, power brakes and power everything else). I recently read an article in Newsweek about the “American Car Culture”, how the baby boomers have dictated style and how their identities are tied up in their wheels. Though the author makes a point, it’s just a gloss on the subject. The growing complexity of the car from the 50’s until now was not even mentioned.

From the 3rd grade until my sophomore year in high school, my family lived in the Deep South. My mother met my father when she was 16 as a skating carhop at a burger joint in Savannah, GA. (Imagine that, a time when cute young women would skate up to your car with refreshments!). My dad was a young enlisted airman who was quite

dashing in a Clark Gable kind of way. They eloped (she had lied and said she was 18) and somehow after a short 4-year stint in Puerto Rico, living in Oregon and two places in California, my dad worked it some way with the Air Force to get stationed closer to Savannah (my mother being deeply depressed and homesick). Looking back, I'm sure those requests cost him a promotion. My dad had grown up on a ranch (what most of us would call a farm), in the fertile newly-irrigated San Fernando Valley. His father was a fallen Pennsylvania German-Amish and his mother was half-Apache – to which I have always attributed his incongruous, unbelievable patience and hair-trigger temper.

Because of being raised on a farm (German prisoners were interred there in WWII) with farm equipment (he lost a finger in a tractor accident), he was and still is one of the most mechanical people I've ever met....one of those men who invent machines, things out of disparate parts and tin cans that actually worked. He could, and still can, fix anything mechanical. It is something I always admired and will never, ever live up to.....but I digress.

Growing up southern meant spending time with my mother's family, the Cannons. My mom had two brothers and two sisters, Scotch Irish, feisty, colorful, quick-witted, suffering-no-fools – a drinking, fighting, cussing, bigoted, truck drivin' lot. My grandma, "Dollie", was always very strict and never seemed happy to me. My grandpa ran a dump truck business and could cipher any number of figures in his head, even though he couldn't read or write. They lived in rural places outside of Savannah and kept a large garden. I can recall vividly the men working on those trucks at grandma and grandpa's red clay and sand and piney few acres. They'd be pulling a transmission (heavy difficult work) covered in grease, the acrid smell of spent transmission fluid on

them. It didn't occur to them to take it to the shop. They were the shop. And if you're dirt poor, you fix it yourself or it wouldn't get fixed. And if you couldn't, what kind of man were you?

During those times, I stayed out of the way. After all, it was dangerous and cursing and ridicule were forms of sport. And since they were generally drinking, it was kinda scary. Anyway, Grandma had some chores for me to do...usually shucking beans or corn.

When I was a little kid, I hated being sent out to "help your father with the car". It was deathly boring, being still, holding a flash light. "Hold it still, God Dammit!" and "Hand me that 9/16th extended socket"; "Not that one damn it!" and so on.

But all in all and even so, some of it rubbed off and I was sure glad in those lean years in grad school from '79 to '82, when bacon and popcorn were staples and I sold my blood to Hoxworth for \$20.00 to buy beer; that I somehow found in my memory banks the remembrance of how to replace a water pump, change the points and plugs, rebuild a carburetor, replace an idler arm or, in short, do what was needed to keep my cars running and avoid the labor expense of a real mechanic.

Indulge me, again, for a look back to those carefree days as a child in the rural south. My Uncle Robert just died recently of cancer. He and Aunt Sybil, a former Playboy playmate lived east of Savannah in Port Wentworth on the Savannah River. He was a truck driver who started an overland trucking company and was always up to his elbows in grease. I remember what seemed to be impromptu family reunions there with lots of cousins, uncles and friends. The highlight of these events, to me, were the wonderful meals.

Uncle Robert had a net and where they lived on the mouth of the Atlantic, they'd pull in bushels of shrimp and indigenous fish. (True story. Nearly twenty years later at a reunion outside Atlanta, I asked, not intending to be a smart-aleck college kid, a group of men, uncles, cousins, second cousins and other assorted good old boys who were standing over a tub cleaning fish, "What kinda fish are these? Are they indigenous?" -- "No, Chrees, they're just feesh we caught around here.")

But back to the old days and the feast.... When I was 7, 8 and 9, the men would come back from hunting squirrel, with maybe 2 or 3 bushels of squirrels and grandpa would bring 20 or 30 blackbirds all killed with shotguns (watch for the buckshot!). The squirrels would be skinned, cleaned and fried; the blackbirds plucked and fried; the shrimp boiled and fish fried, with what seemed an endless supply of vegetables, side dishes and desserts; biscuits; cornbread; hoecake; corn – as pudding, on the cob and creamed; mashed potatoes with gravy French fries; pigtails and rice; poke salad; turnips; turnip and collard greens; field peas; lima beans; candied yams; blackberry cobbler; peach and lemon meringue pies and; salty boiled peanuts as late-night snacks. These summer feasts always ended with the grownups playing poker for change. We kids would run around outside playing with the squirrel tails.....

But back to Kartok. In my life I've owned 10 automobiles. There are a plethora of stores associated with them, but this is not a paper "about", but "around" cars. Cars are merely a vehicle for these stories. My original intention was to tell you a story or two about each, but now I think I'll just hit the highlights of a few of them. The cars of my life have been in chronological order:

A '62 Rambler Stationwagon

A '58 VW Beetle

A '73 Chevy Vega

A '65 Plymouth Valiant

A '75 AMC Hornet

A '79 brown Nissan Truck

An '84 Blue Nissan Truck (my first and only new car)

An '86 Toyota hatchback hand-me-down from Bethie

A '92 Suzuki Sidekick 4WD hand-me-down

And presently a Red 4 WD 5-speed '99 Nissan Pickup

The 1962 Rambler station wagon 6-cylinder had a 3-speed transmission with overdrive. It had an easy-to-work-on and dependable flat-head-six engine configuration. It was very reliable and handy to carry marching band equipment in. Like most cars of that era, it was easy to work on and troubleshoot. My dad taught me to drive when I was 15 in that car and I still remember it like it was yesterday....dad taking me out, trying to distract me by making me turn on and tune the radio, do the wipers, roll the window up and down; and on rainy days, he'd teach me skids on those long straight flat Georgia two-lanes. (Do kids learning today practice skids?) That Rambler had something you don't see much anymore: an on-the-steering column gear shift, "three on the tree", plus, (and this was really cool), it hadoverdrive. That is, you could get a 4th gear by releasing the accelerator and re-engaging it quickly. This was fun, 'cause you could wind up that second gear, quickly lift your right foot and the car would advance to third and you'd have that 4th gear on the column. RPM's have always been fun.

Sex in cars has been around as long as there have been cars. But in the '50's, 60's and 70's it was really part of the culture. Think drive-ins. Think Woodstock. The two years I drove that car, I don't remember ever having sex, making out, or even holding hands in it. I had become a bonafide, born-again, Jesus freak, witnessing door-to-door, speaking in tongues; the whole deal. And anyway the object of my affection was Cathy Stanford, a devout Christian girl who was also the best trumpet player in the region. To this day I've never heard a more dulcet tone. Whatever hormonal urges I had for her, I poured into my trumpet practice. The rest was taken care of by Jesus. That worked pretty good and eventually I was the second best player in the region, with a seat next to Cathy. Ain't love grand? I eventually totaled that car...it's a long story that's shaped my moral compass to this day. But, there's no room for it in this paper.

I got my second car in the spring of 11th grade. The family had moved in the fall to Newport News, Virginia, where my dad was the Tower Chief at Felker Army Air Field as a GS-rated civilian. It was a 1958 VW Beetle with a 4-on-the-floor. It had a sunroof and a port-hole rear window. It also had a built-in practical joke in the rear seat. The battery was under the seat and with those old springs and poor suspension, a person sitting in back would receive a little shock from the springs touching the battery on an uneven road.

We sold that car and used the down payment toward the worst car I've ever owned; probably ever made; worse than Grandma's Edsel, worse than a Pinto, worse than the future Yugo's. In 1974, Detroit was metaphorically shitting out cheap, poorly constructed, good mileage machines and my 1973 green Vega was a lemon among lemons. The 4-on-the-floor gear shift was always getting jammed. I'll never forget the

amount of frustration it caused, and although it was a horrible machine, I did own it through some crazy college years.

By the time I'd finished my freshman year at the Conservatory, with the questions, speculations and idea exchange that happen in college settings, I'd lost most of whatever previous feelings I'd had about Jesus, although He was keeping me employed at two different churches. The big question that could never be answered by the evangelical/fundamentalist side was: If Jesus is the only way to heaven, what about all the non-Christians whose religious tenants were valid for them as a part of their own faith journey? The answer was always black and white, no wiggle-room. They were destined to burn in Hell – simple as that. About the middle of 12th grade, I started turning my back on that kind of arrogant certainty.

The timing couldn't have been better, because in the USA for a relatively short time after the pill and before AIDS, sex was in abundance and easy; a no-strings-attached kind of fun. And for a 19-year-old music student on a campus that had an adjacent applied nursing college, it translated into a couple of cases of the clap and lots of car sex. Making out in the little Vega was interesting. It had bucket seats, but with the driver's seat back and the steering wheel for support and leverage, fun could be had. There's a good story in that car that involves a monkey that I'll save for a future budget.

In the summer of 1977 I traded that very used Vega for a 1965 Plymouth Valiant. It had a push-button automatic transmission and a very powerful 283 V8 for such a small car. It was my first automatic transmission and would be the most memorable car I've ever owned.

Here are just a few tales, as my storied history with that remarkable car could fill this paper alone. Shenandoah College and Conservatory of Music, now Shenandoah University, is located in Virginia in the Shenandoah Valley at the intersection of Rt. 17 and Interstate 81; two hours from DC, twenty miles from West Virginia in the northwest corner of the state. Shenandoah sits on a plateau in the town of Winchester and for about a 60° vista you can see the Blue Ridge and Smoky Mountains.

One of the churches I worked in in those years as a paid soloist was the Episcopal Church in Upperville and on Sunday mornings a quartet of college singers would make the trip down Hwy. 17 toward D.C. for a half-hour trip of breathtaking vistas, over the mountains and through places like Bull Run and Manassas. I sang the bass solo in Britten's *Rejoice in the Lamb* on an Easter Sunday in that church and was surprised to see Liz Taylor and then husband Sen. John Warner in the congregation. Upperville was and is in the middle of an area of very wealthy horse farms and late 18th century mansions. I'll never forget those early Sunday morning drives in the Valiant with the sun rising through the mountain mist.

In the spring of 1977, through some unbelievable turn of events, a group of us students convinced the College lecture series to schedule a writer, Chris Miller, of National Lampoon fame. Often scatological, he wrote silly short stories about things like illicit drug use, wild college parties and masturbation. Even so, he is a good story teller. If you've never heard of the National Lampoon, think *MAD Magazine* for college kids. It's satire like *The Onion*; add sex. We who loved that irreverent magazine knew of Chris' stories but he was also a pretty hot commodity; having written the screen play for the movie "Animal House" that had just come out the summer before.

I'll never understand how those administrators allowed this filthy-minded, dirty-mouthed, disgusting story teller at our Methodist-based institution. The only thing I can think of is that the *Harvard Lampoon* was in their minds and they did no research on our request before agreeing to it.

Here's an excerpt from one of Chris' short stories written in the '70's:

“The air of my studio roiled with the sweet scent of pigment. My hands were slick to the wrists, my clothing splotched and smeared. I was tired but elated. The painting was finished and very, very good. Some artists will tell you they are incompetent to judge their own work. Once complete, their painting seems to have come from elsewhere. *I didn't paint it, man, they say, I just painted it down.* Not me. I'd *painted* that painting and knew with certainty it was the best thing I'd ever put on plaster. My school is chiaroscuro frescoes, whatever that means. The barely completed one, lustrous in the late afternoon sun, was a slow explosion of moody swirls called *In a Brown Study*. The more I stared, the more excited I became. My first totally abstract work was a creation of high inspiration, even genius. It would strike my critics dumb.”

“I was applying my signature (a palm print in the southeast corner) when *Oh Horseshit*, my head Big One and harshest critic, threw open the door and began addressing me in his strange guttural language. He broke off abruptly as I stepped back from the wall. He stared. I held my breath, watching his eyes for that glint of recognition, wishing to cherish those few seconds during which he would first grasp the magnitude of what he was seeing.”

“ ‘Jumping Jesus!’ He spun. ‘Helen! The little asshole’s wiping his shit on the wall again!’”

The night of Chris’ (quote) “lecture”(he just read a few of his short stories), there was a full house with lots of faculty and administration types and about 75 hard core Lampoon fans in the front. (There wasn’t a lot to do in Winchester.) After a few minutes, the theology faculty walked out and a few minutes later the faculty advisor running the lecture series had turned off the stage lights. A few more minutes passed and Chris’ mike was turned off. Then he moved forward and spoke louder with an invitation, “Come closer children, come sit around Uncle Chris’ Campfire”. All this to the background of hysterical laughter, boo’s, and shouting from the audience. It was a great night of farce and I had the opportunity to pick Chris up and take him back to Dulles in the Valiant. The morning after the lecture, Chris had a 9:00 a.m. flight. I remember driving over the mountains on Rt. 17 to that unbelievable vista of the Valley with the sun coming up over the mountains, sharing a recreational joint with my then-namesake hero.

For four years the trusty Valiant got me from point A to point B with little trouble and fast. It drove me to the West Virginia Mountains as a student teacher in a one room school house. With it I stole apples. It forged creeks. In it enjoyed making out with five girlfriends (Lynn, Adrian, Carol, Cindy and Sarah). It got me to two auditions: one at the Conservatory in Cincinnati where I was awarded a University Graduate Scholarship. All I had to do was leave the mountains and the sweet town of Winchester. (Natives of that area had a lovely mountain/southern colloquialism that was truly endearing. Where any of us might say “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything that”...a Winchester native

will add a “’deed”; short for indeed at the beginning of the sentence. Like: “’Deed, I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like that.”)

On my second trip to Cincinnati, I put every thing I owned in a U-haul, hooked it to the Valiant and while driving through the mountains, fried the transmission. And although I made it to town, it never really ran well after that, sticking in one gear or another, gears sometimes not engaging at all. That, tied to the fact that I knew no one here and had absolutely no money or job yet, no money for the tow; and although I’d replaced or fixed the water pump, radiator, hoses, points, plugs, brakes, timing belt, idler arm assembly and more ---- transmission work was out of my league. I abandoned the Valiant unceremoniously on West McMicken where I’m sure the radiator cracked that cold winter of ’79-80.

For a couple of years, I went without a car; difficult and emasculating in our culture. I learned that biking in Cincinnati wasn’t easy. I experienced a lot one of those summers hitching from Cincinnati to San Diego after a nurse girlfriend and then back to the Chesapeake. In the Spring of ’81, I was handed an instructor job at Raymond Walter’s College teaching an elective that was essentially a music appreciation class disguised as a Glee Club. In those days the Metro bus didn’t run to Blue Ash, so in the Fall I’d need a car to get out to the ‘burbs.

I borrowed money from my parents. “This is the last time”, and it was.....and I bought a very used ’73 AMC Hornet for \$500.00. The Hornet was completely utilitarian. It had no radio, no AC, the heater was suspect and one windshield wiper didn’t work. It did have a reliable 6-cylinder engine and made the trip back to Cincinnati easily. And it was easy to work on, not unlike the Rambler nearly 10 years earlier.

There are a few good stories in that car, but let me share one. One time after singing Christmas Eve services at St. Peter in Chains, before I was married (although Ms Troendly was on the radar screen) I drove home to the Chesapeake Bay. At about 1:00 a.m., I packed the Hornet with presents and headed east, beat from working extra shifts as an orderly at Good Sam. The hornet had bald tires and the aforementioned no heat or radio There had just been no time to work on the car while carrying 20 hours and working the graveyard shift at the hospital. And around 2:00 a.m. I was already nodding off somewhere before Columbus; coffee wasn't working and stopping wasn't an option. So I took half a hit of LSD a buddy had given me, hoping the small dose would do more stimulate than hallucinate and, you know it worked!.... Except every little sound on that cold, late, lonely highway sent my mind spinning paranoid scenarios of being broken down, freezing to death, being found on the side of the road stiff, stuck to the wheel. Driving the West Virginia Mountains between Wheeling and Beckley at around 5:00 a.m. it started snowing hard. There were many prayers and at about 6:00 a.m. I started coming down from that half-hit and the sleep monsters started coming back. Just then, miraculously, as the dawn was just beginning to erase the dark, snow falling at the top of a hill, I saw a man trying to hitch a ride. Thank you, Jesus, someone to talk to! When I picked up the cold soul, there weren't any cars anywhere for miles so unfortunately for him (no heat) and fortunately for me, I was rescued from the silence for that painful transience that happens driving from night to light. The fellow hitching, worked a barge on the Ohio and after a 3-month stint was on his way home in Beckley for Christmas. That guy was an angel and got me through the hardest part of the drive. By the way, the bald tires never slipped or skidded that whole trip.

If you are keeping count, you know I've still got five cars left...two pickups and two hand-me downs and my present very used 4 WD Nissan pickup...all of which have good stories in them, but as I'm now running out of time. Let me invite you all to reminisce about road trips and cars you've owned...about working on your own machine; the pleasure of accomplishment, the disappearing joy of the open road. It's still out there, but harder to find, as a wonderful book by William Least Heat Moon *Blue Highways* will attest to.

A postscript. Three weeks ago I helped a friend in the neighborhood with a broken gutter/downspout and out on the street were three young women dressed in the Brittny Spears slut-chic of the day standing around a car with the hood up. They looked forlorn and very confused. One had a container of anti-freeze/coolant. They sighted me..."Mr., Could you help us? We can't figure out what hole it goes in", sounding Southern and sweet as honey.

How could I resist?

Christian Miller

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