

Slug's Last Stand - A Memoir

“the moment that hard-bop came to an end as a vital force in Jazz was when Lee Morgan was shot dead by his jealous mistress at Slug’s club on the lower east side of New York City. . .” Alyn Shipton- *A New History of Jazz*, 2007

In 2018 when I read Mr. Shipton’s comments I realize that I had a behind-the-scenes view of a small but vital piece of jazz history.

James Gavin in his article *INSIDE SLUG’S SALOON, JAZZ’S MOST NOTORIOUS NIGHT CLUB* describes the neighbor hood.

“In the 1960s, New York’s East Village was a hodgepodge of Lower East Side multi-ethnicity-Ukrainians, Poles, Puerto Ricans, Jews and a burgeoning Bohemia of coffeehouses, experimental theatre and artists. Poverty and rampant drug action formed the . . . “The neighborhood had a beat to it that went on 24 hours,” says Charles Biada, then a



Albert Ayler light jacket outside Slug's

young police officer at the nearby Ninth Precinct. “Somehow everyone seemed to interrelate.”

Then night fell, and the unlit streets vibrated with danger. Dealers skulked in doorways; muggings were common. But that didn’t stop musicians and their fans from trekking into scary Alphabet City, east of First Avenue, to visit a club that lured the bravest renegades in jazz. Taxi drivers avoided the area, and the nearest subway stop was blocks away; those who lacked a car walked briskly. Along the way they passed squalid tenements, a men’s homeless shelter and the clubhouse of the Hells Angels, with a row of Harley-Davidsons outside. Past Avenue B, at 242 East 3rd Street, stood a bar whose hanging wooden sign read “Slugs’.” According to *Sounds & Fury*, a jazz magazine of the day, the windows were “usually dirty,” the front door “hard to open.” It had two eye-level grates, out of which spilled tough-sounding jazz. According to author Paul Pines—who later opened another neighborhood jazz club, the Tin Palace—“you knew you were at the gates of the underworld.”

PREFACE

I was not at Slugs in February 1972 when Lee Morgan was shot but it had a profound impact on me. In early May of that year I finished my course work for my Masters degree and fled the dry corridors of SUNY Binghamton for the juicy street life of Alphabet City.

This is my memoir of what I witnessed and experienced in 1972. I am certain that I do not have the time and sequence of events absolutely correct but I will do my best to tell the truth, the whole truth (except for the parts that would be too embarrassing) and nothing but the truth (except the part that would get me in trouble or really piss off my friends and loved ones.) Of course, there will be much that is based on my personal impression as seen through the fog of pot, alcohol and anxiety that colored my perception.

No doubt that I will get some of the details wrong. Especially which musician played with which group. I confess to some reluctance to write about this. So much of what the public encounters in books and film exploits the dramatic self - destructive behavior of certain jazz musician, especially drug and alcohol abuse. I am sorry to say that was a significant part of this story. Even though Slug's may have been the worst of it, there were many beautiful, creative spontaneous moments that lit up those nights in Alphabet city.



Inside Slug's

You don't read much about the endless hours of practice, and dedication it takes to gain the technical mastery of an instrument required to play jazz. Nor do you hear about the creativity and imagination intrinsic to the improvised solo. Or about working in small venues for little pay that makes it nearly impossible to support oneself, let alone a family, as a jazz musician.

THE BEGINNING

In the winter of 71- 72 Bernie (not his real name) bought Slug's, a renowned NYC jazz club from Robert and Jerry. He paid \$10,000 down and \$10,000 to be paid some time in the future. I never knew the exact details. Bernie was a very large, strong, dark skinned black man of about 30. He had a huge laugh that filled the room. He had worked in the club for a few years as the door man (or more accurately, the bouncer.) I was in my early 20s, and thought he was a mature, experienced man, wise in the ways of the world. That opinion changed in the next six months.

I don't want you to think I was a nerdy academic type who had no business venturing into the under world of the NYC jazz scene. At the age of 25 I had spent time in the county farm for committing civil disobedience against the war in Vietnam, and more serious time in Mansfield State prison for possession of LSD. Not that being incarcerated prepared me to run a jazz club. But it conditioned me to deal with a wide range of personalities and high stress situations.

Bernie lived with B, a white woman who taught school in the Bronx. I was married to P., B's sister. The money Bernie used to buy the club was, in part borrowed from P and B's parents and Bernie's share of a very small manufacturing company in upstate NY. It was all in the family, so to speak. Bernie was struggling to keep it together. I was finishing graduate school with no job prospects or any idea were get one. I was very fond of jazz. So it made some sense for me to go to NYC and help out the family. In fact, I couldn't get out of Binghamton fast enough. After all, I was offered one of the hippest jobs in the world!

Is this a co-incidence or what?



151 Ave, B 1

P. and I went apartment hunting in the Far East Village. We looked at a nice 1 bedroom place right on Tompkins Square Park on Tenth near Avenue B.

The owner, a conservative attorney, showed us around the apartment that was the 3rd floor of the building. It was lovely with a deck that offered a sun set view over the park.

"I don't know about jazz and all that kind of stuff but I have heard of Slug's and it seems to be a well known place. So I guess it would be a stable source of income. In fact, this apartment used to belong to a well know jazz musician. His name was Byrd."

"Oh, Charlie Byrd the guitar player?"

"No, I don't think that was it. I think his name was Charlie and they just called him Bird"

Okay, my readers who know a little something about jazz, you can get up off the floor now. Yes, it was true, I came to NYC to manage Slug's with zero qualification. The job just dropped in my lap. Through no effort, or attempt on my part, we rented the apartment that was the former home of Charlie Parker, the genius who was one of the most important figures in the history of jazz.

SURPRISES FROM THE START

May 1972 - Day one as manager of Slug's, Bernie the owner and I left his Cristie St. loft about noon, which was an early start to the work day in this business. Bernie flagged down a cab and gave him a mid-town address. That surprised me because Slug's was on 3rd street between A and B, the heart of Alphabet city. Our destination was geographically a mile or two away but culturally in another universe.

"We goin' to a recording session with Larry Coryell." Bernie said in a deep Bahamian accent. If I paid close attention, I could understand most of what he was saying. Unless he was speaking to another Bahamian, in which case I couldn't understand a thing either of them said.

The cab dropped us somewhere near Times Square. The building was an old hotel and the recording studio was in what used to be the grand ballroom. The 30 foot high ceiling apparently had great acoustics. Moving quietly, trying not to disturb the session, we found our way to comfortable chairs in the control room. In the center of the recording studio was Larry Coryell, one of my heroes, a pioneer of the jazz/rock sound. He was alone in the room on a chair with his guitar. A single spotlight pointed down on him, illuminating the cavernous space. He held a semi hollow guitar in his lap. It was turned upside down with the strings in his lap. On the back side of the instrument; he was delicately laying out lines of cocaine.



Larry Coryell

Ah ha! That is why we were there. Bernie knew they were recordings and if they were recording there would be coke. He may have been the supplier of the drug or just hoping for a couple of free lines. That should have been my warning that this job had perilous possibility. I already had a criminal record. Another arrest would put me in deep shit. Then again, it was not my nature to avoid either the risks or the pleasures of the situation. If I had any sense I would have run out of there.

Instead, we caught a ride down town from Larry. There were 2 topics of discussion on that ride. One was Gato Barbieri, a rising star saxophonist on the international jazz scene.

The other was what was the best way to have opium high. Bernie advocated taking at least 2 days undisturbed that you can dedicate it to eating and smoking the black tarry stuff.

"Man, its freaky. You can be dreaming a tiger is chasing you through the jungle and branches are tearing at you clothes. And when you wake up your clothes are torn! And you ain't left the bed!"

DEALING WITH NYC ADMINISTRATION

A couple of days later Bernie tells me that the Board of Health was going to shut us down. We had failed the previous inspection because the gas flame that heated the water in which glasses were washed was not functioning. (I am sure the gas service was terminated for non-payment.) I had to go way uptown to a meeting set to happen in 2 hours and tell them the flame was working (which it was not) and talk them into rescheduling an on premises inspection for the club. Bernie explained why I had to go instead of him.

“ A young white guy, right out of college, man. They’re going to believe you a lot easier than me.” I had to agree, at least they would understand what I was saying without the accent.

Being only vaguely familiar with NYC and completely unacquainted with anything above 14th St., it was a miracle I found the place where the hearing was supposed to be. I met with three heavysset guys in well-worn suits. I convinced them I represented new management and problems like this were a thing of the past. Of course, I was faking every minute but at this early stage of the game I still thought Bernie knew what he was doing. They agreed to reschedule the inspection for three days later. I told Bernie what happened. He was delighted! He promised to fix the sink.

Three days later, an hour before the inspector was due, the sink was not fixed. Bernie said, “Here I’ll show you how to fix it.” He pulled out a \$50 bill and put it under the sink where the flame was supposed to be. The inspector came and went, so did the \$50. This sink did not work one second in the 6 months I was at the Club. I never heard another word about it from the Board of Health. I had no moral qualms about bribing these guys. We were still in the midst of the counter cultural thinking. Anything you could get over on the establishment was okay.

MAX ROACH THINKS I AM A GENIUS!

The first night I managed the club. Max Roach, the seminal be-bop drummer, was playing. He didn’t usually play clubs as small as Slug’s. He told me he only agreed to play there because Bernie was black and it was very important that a black man

owned a place featuring top-flight musicians, most of whom were black. (I am Italian/Irish) He showed me the receipts from his last gig. It was 3 times what we were paying him. And we were paying him 3 times more than what we usually paid. You get the picture. Musicians playing at Slug’s didn’t make a lot of money. Yet we still had an unbelievable line up.



Max Roach

(At the end of this essay is a list of the musician that I can remember who played there in the months I was there.) *

It was about 3 AM, the rest of the band was packed up and out the door. Max had his kit loaded into the back of ford station wagon, circa 1956. He was waiting for his wife to come with a can of gasoline. His car wouldn't start and he was praying it was just out of gas. They poured the gas into the tank and cranked it up. It didn't start. Tried again, no good. They looked at each other. They were stranded in the notorious Alphabet City neighborhood with a drum kit in the middle the night. Once more they tried to start it but the battery was obviously wearing down.

"Wait, wait, you are going to use up the battery."
I asserted myself.

"Let me try something."

I was no stranger to old cars and running out of gas, either from living on a shoe string budget or just neglecting the gas gauge.

"Do you have a little bit of gas in the can."

I shook it and heard maybe a couple tablespoons splashing in the bottom.

I popped the hood took off the air filter and poured the remaining gas directly into the carburetor.

"Quick, try it once more."

Crank, crank, crank, POW it started.

Relief flowed across the faces of the Roachs. Max was astonished that I knew how to do this.

I was just glad I was able to do something useful!

THE CLUB

Slug's was one long room with a sawdust floor. If you never experienced it, a saw dust floor is an old unfinished wood floor too cracked, warped and stained to be cleaned by modern techniques like a mop and bucket. Twice a week a delivery comes of burlap sacks filled with saw dust. The sawdust is spread over the floor and absorbs spilt beer and miscellaneous trash that falls on the floor. Then the sawdust is swept out with a push broom, disposed of and replaced.

There was no office, no dressing room, no green room for the musicians to escape the fans. Some of the cats slipped across the street to a neighborhood bar where the

drinks were cheaper and they could get a little privacy. There was a cloakroom, an 8' by 4' space with a half door where supplies, when we had them, were kept. Access to the basement was via ground level metal door on the sidewalk that unfolded to a set of steps. That was where the kegs of draft beer were kept. It was also where pot smoking and other activities that needed to not be public went on.

On a good night the club was crowded and stuffy. The scene flowed out to the sidewalk and the street in front of the club. The neighborhood and the music became one. No time was this more real than a Monday night when Sun Ra and the Solar Arkestra made the scene. The leader, Sun Ra claimed he was visiting the planet from outer space.

<https://youtu.be/1qjiQwD7VCI> This video was not taped in Slugs but is pretty much shows the way they looked and sounded



Sun Ra

He performed with a dozen or more musicians, singers and dancers who all wore extravagant customs. Except for a young nearly naked male dancer who pranced and leaped the length of the bar.

Sun Ra's compositions ranged from repetitive chants

"Space is the place,
Space is the place..."

to wild avant garde collective improvisations. In which the players redefined the sonic limits of the instruments. As did Pat Patrick on the alto sax in the video clip.

(BTW- this is the father of Deval Patrick, Governor of Mass.)

Sun Ra often brought a large fan that he set to blow on himself to make his cape flurry in the wind.

He was not limited by the size of the stage. Accompanied by a female singer, he would walk through the audience, serenading each table, some times breaking the barrier of personal space. Often as confrontational as they were melodic., they went straight through the club, out the door and into the street. Here he would join a cadre of Hispanics from the neighborhood, who, drawn by the sound, brought their congas, circled around the door and became a live, spontaneous part of the sound.

A lot of the action happened on that sidewalk front of the club. There were usually 3 sets a night 9, 11 and 1am. One particular night between the 11 and the 1 o'clock set Archie Shepp, was playing with Jimmy Garrison and Rashid Ali. I was standing about 20 feet away. Other wise the streets were deserted. I heard Shepp say something like, "I love the part where he goes," and he starts scatting the solo. And Rasheid



Archie Shepp

says, “Yeah, yeah, yeah and the drums go (he scats the drum part) It doesn’t take Jimmy more the a couple of bars to jump in. And they start rolling, for at least 3 verses. And finished by cracking up in laughter and slapping five. I was the only one who heard. I knew something special had just happened and this was an experience that no other 25 year old white kid is likely to have.

Yeah, the club oozed out into the street and sometimes the street came into the club. A day or 2 after the scat incident, I was stranding outside just a few feet from Rashied Ali. He had a brother who was a neighborhood character. He was an addict who sometimes made money by distributing a local newsletter. I had very little interaction with him but I had the sense that he was tolerated or even liked by the people in the area.

So we were standing outside the club when a young black man on a bicycle came pedaling down the street. Rashid yells out, “Frankie, hey Frankie! You seen my brother?



Frankie slams on the brake.

“Man you ain’t heard nothing about him?”

Rashied says, “What, I ain’t seen him in a few days”

“I think he’s dead man” says Frankie.

“What happened, did you see anything?”

“Up in the park, you know where he hangs out, I saw them taking him out of there on stretcher, he looked

dead to me. Sorry man.” And Frankey rides away.

Rashied Ali

So, there I am. No one around but Rashied and me. I tried to say some consoling words but what the hell do I know. We weren’t even sure he was dead. Our only information was a guy on a bicycle riding through Alphabet City at 2 AM. I never did find out what happened to his brother.

Archie Shepp was greatly influenced by Coltrane musically but politically he was an angry Black Man. He was out spoken and wrote radical poetry. That’s why I was a little taken aback one night when he showed up at the club with a group of older white people dress in suits. I was collecting the admission fee at the door, and believe me, every cent was needed.

Shepp says to me “ I have some people that I want to be my guests”

And in walks the very famous Linda Ronstadt. She smiles and bats her eyes. And I say "Sure come on in."

Then Shepp brings in another guy. "This is her manager, he is my guest as well."

"Yeah, Ok but things are a little tight. We got to pay you guys out of this money."

"Yeah," he points out more people. "I just got these one, two, three four, five more people."

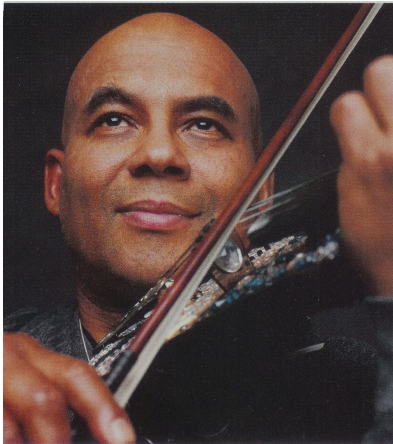
"Five is too many" I say. "We need the money." And we were off in an argument that got pretty nasty. I don't remember much of the details besides offering to give the five others a free drink after they paid the admission and Shepp saying that I was drunk.

I don't remember the resolution but my overall feeling was that he was showing off for the white people and was embarrassed. Not to mention really pissed at me.

I wasn't used to this. Who the hell was I to tell Archie Shepp who had to pay and who didn't? This was just the beginning of "uncomfortable situations" that came with the job.

PART 2

Slug's was only a couple blocks from the East River. One hot night I was standing on the sidewalk near the door. As the fog rolled in, a striking figure emerged from the mist. Dressed in a black karate gi, he carried a case in one hand and the other rested on the hilt of a samurai sword at his waist. I hoped he wasn't coming here but of course he was. He barely acknowledged me with a nod as he entered the club.



John Blair plays the vitar

As I followed him in I thought, "Is this Okay? Should I say something? Like what?"

He walked straight up onto the stage, set his sword in the corner and unpacked his instrument. He was John Blair, part of Leon Thomas' band which was booked for the week.

Leon Thomas was a large man who dressed in Afro centric attire. Although his music was contemporary his act was old school. He was the only performer that wore make up on stage. He had Pee Wee Ellis on baritone sax and John Blair on

vitar. The vitar is a five string electric solid-state cross between a violin and guitar which Blair invented and he made it sing!

To my knowledge, Leon was the only jazz musician who Yodeled. It sounds weird when you say it but he made the yodel work. Think about it. Coltrane's latest works, his spiritual stuff featured extended modal slurs. They were not that different from a yodel. Coltrane had been dead around 4 years and Pharaoh Sanders was the main descendent of the spiritual sound.



Pharaoh's signature tune The Creator Has a Master Plan featured Leon's yodel. He also had a hit with Horace Silver's Song For My Father to which he added lyrics and a yodeling part. Leon's music was both innovative and accessible. He exuded positive energy; spiritual but rooted in the blues. I don't think he had much financial success in America and I believe he moved to Europe. If you want to hear jazz yodel try this link. <https://youtu.be/hSYwGEiowHg>. It's about a minute and a half into the recording.

Freddie Hubbard was arising star when he played Slug's a couple weeks later. It was near the end of the school year. It must have been prom night or graduation or something special because about a dozen young African Americans showed up dressed to the hilt. I'm talking gowns and tuxedos. They came to hear Freddie. He had a killer band with George Cables on keys and Junior Cook on tenor. Unfortunately, no Freddie. It was nine o'clock, time to hit and no one knew where Freddie was. By 9:30 the crowd was getting real agitated. Junior took over and led the band for a set. They where great! Half the crowd was fine with that. The other half was on my case. They paid to see Freddie. I had no clue. No way was I giving back the money.



Freddie Hubbard

Near the end of the set Freddie shows up. He looks at the stage, sees the band is doing well and says to me,

"I left my horn in New Jersey. Don't worry; it's just across the river. I'll be back in a half hour." And he's gone! My stomach sank. "What was I going to tell these people? What a terrible feeling!

To his credit Freddie did make it back in a half an hour and played brilliantly.

The next night was the end of his four-day run. Bernie showed up. We paid Freddie. Bernie locked the door. There was only Bernie, me, Freddie and a couple of his friends. I was stationed at the door while every one else was in the front of the

place. They pulled out the coke and snorted up the entire nights draw. When the coke was gone they were gone, too.

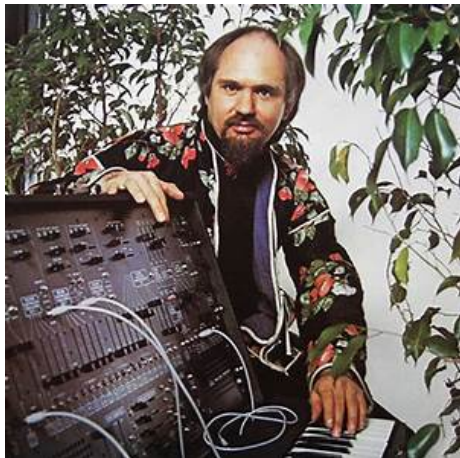
That was a very profitable night. We had raised the admission. Even after we paid Freddie we had a grand left over. Bernie took the cash, he said, to pay his rent. Monday morning there was nothing to pay the bills.

I didn't want to think Bernie was a junky but reality kept hitting me over the head. One day when I opened the club I found a cooker on the bar. A cooker is a home made spoon like device which is used to heat and dissolve drugs in water that can be injected. I had locked up the night before and only Bernie had another key. He didn't have much of a reply when I showed it to him. His cover was completely blown a couple weeks later when I walked in on him at his loft in the midst of shooting up. He assured me he had it under control and only used every once in a while. He showed me where he kept his stash in case I had to get rid on it in an emergency. Now all I had to do was believe he had the extra ordinary self-control to use addictive drugs in a casual, recreational manner.

Crime and violence were commonplace in the neighborhood. On those nights when there was money left at the end of evening, I brought the cash home with me. I put the money in my shoes for the seven block, 4 AM stroll though the urban jungle. I often passed a body lying on the sidewalk. Whether they were sleeping, passed out or dead, I didn't know. I felt bad about leaving them lying on the ground but I just wanted to make it home in one piece.

My first couple of months there, May and June were good. We had great music and reasonable size audiences. In mid summer, however, New York City falls into a restless stupor. Any one that can, leaves town.

Larry Coryell was an exception. He came back mid summer and drew a good crowd. Steve Marcus was on soprano sax. The club had only one microphone that ran to a powerful amplifier and speakers throughout. Most of the players got by on that, as they were acoustic bands. Not this band. They had electric guitar, bass and keys



Mike Mandel - keys

with their own amps. Steve played the sax through the house mike. He cranked that baby up, stuck his horn right into the mike and blew away. Every one else cranked up to meet his level. The sound was ear shattering. Mike Mandel the blind but loquacious key board player introduced his new composition, Oedipus Rex, the King of Cunnalingus.

The room was so jammed full with white college aged fan that they nearly sat on the stage. The waitress could not get to the tables. These kids apparently felt shielded by the anonymity of the

crowd. They started passing joints around. This was not cool! The Board of Health or the NYPD would have shut us down in a minute. Imagine the chutzpah it took in 1972 to commit a felony in a very exposed place. Righteous indignation is one of my favorite emotions! So I waded into the crowd to tell these guys they couldn't do that. A few resisted. My anger switch flipped on! My voice racheted up to compete with the band. My eyes bulged out and I let out a string of curse words and threats to curl your toes. The joints disappeared.

Larry finished the set and the crowd filed out, except for one guy who was sitting on a chair, right in the middle of the room. Every one had left. There was just me, Jim the bartender and the guy in the chair.

I yelled "Yo, man. Time to go. We are closing up." No response.

I walk to immediately in front of him. "Hey man we are closing up!" Nothing.

I shook his shoulders. Nothing.

Jim comes over and blows a loud whistle in his ear. Nothing!

I pour a glass of water on his head. Nothing.

Jim grabs a handful of ice from behind the bar and puts it down his shirt. Nothing

I say to Jim. "I think we have to call an ambulance. This is not going to be good."

Jim says. "The cops have us on their shit list since Lee was killed."

"Yeah but what else can we do?"

Just then another young man in a highly agitated state comes in. He spots the guy in the chair. "What's going on? I've been looking all over for him."

I reply. "I don't think he's dead yet. I don't know how he is staying in the chair. But he's unconscious. We are about to call an ambulance."

"Shit!"

He runs across the floor and kicks the chair at full speed. The chair and the guy go flying across the room and landed on the sawdust floor. The guy gains enough awareness to get to his knees.

His friend grabs him under his shoulders, pulls him to his feet and drags him toward the door.

He says, “Come on asshole. They are closing this place up. You’re going to get us in trouble again.”

Out they went, never to be seen again.

THE APARTNENT

Our apartment was on the 3rd floor, the roof top level. The skylight above our bed, was apparently on the well-traveled route that the teenaged rooftop dweller used to get around the block. We would lay in bed and watch kids, junkies, thieves or whoever they were scramble across the glass. We had a large picture window looking out across the deck and the treetops of Tompkins Square Park. The window was enclosed in heavy metal grates behind inch thick iron bars. So we felt fairly safe inside.

The trick was getting inside. My brother in law Steven was not so lucky. He was 22 years old and 6 foot 6. But height doesn’t mean much against a gun. The only time he came to visit us he took the train from Long Island, walked several blocks to our place and rang the bell. I went to answer the intercom and heard a lot of commotion. Steven was being robbed at gunpoint right on the steps to our apartment!

The same type of thing happened at the club. One night, just as the show was about to start, a guy staggered through the front door, with his head bleeding from a wound. He was babbling in French, he had very little English. We finally figured out what had happened. He came to the club in a cab. He had his wallet out to pay the driver when a guy came up behind him brandishing a gun. The Frenchman made the mistake of resisting. The thief hit him in the head with his gun, grabbed the wallet and took off down the street.



Roy Haines

I helped him get cleaned up, bought him a drink and told him Slugs would pay for his cab ride home. But he wasn’t going home. Hey, Roy Haines was playing! Bleeding head or not. After what he had gone through to get here, he was damned if he was going to miss Roy Haines!

FINANCIAL NEGOTIATION

I came to work early to clean up before opening. We had no money so I became the janitor. We did have a bar tender that kept that area neat but if anything else had to be done it was up to Bernie or me. And Bernie wasn’t around that often. In retrospect I realized that Bernie didn’t stay in the club that often because people would know where to find him. There were a lot of people he did not want talk to.

About 6 o'clock a guy comes in wearing a cheap looking summer suit with a shark's tooth on a gold chain around his neck. Alligator shoes and slicked back hair, he reeked of after-shave. He was very big. It was as if we asked central casting to send a street level mafia soldier.

He introduced himself as Gino and asked if Bernie was in. I told him "No"

"Do you expect him soon?"

"Hard to say, he comes in most days but no regular time"

"I'll wait here a little while in case he shows up."

"Can I help you with some thing?" I say.

"I have some business I need to discuss with Bernie. I'll just wait a little while."

Gino plants himself in a chair and I go on cleaning up. Gino was not a patient guy. After about 10 minutes he starts getting jittery. In a few minutes he's up and pacing.

"I have to take care of some other business. I'll be back in an hour. If he comes in tell him to wait for me. "

He heads for the door but just then Bernie walks in. They nearly collide at the entrance.

Gino introduces himself and explains he is representing Jerry, one of the guys that Bernie bought the business from.

Bernie immediately gets defensive.

"If Jerry needs to talk to me he can talk himself."

"He's out of the country, so he asked me to help him out"

"I don't know you! My deal is with Jerry"

"Jerry is in India and he has some unfinished business with you. I'm trying to help him out. That's what I do. I help people out."

"We don't need no help. I'll take care of it."

"Let me explain how this works. You still owe Jerry \$10,000 from when you bought the business, right?"

"That's my business." says Bernie.

"It was your business but you failed to keep up with the terms. Now I am involved to help Jerry. You see he went to India on his spiritual quest or some shit and he needed that money to make the trip. So I lent Jerry the money. Now you owe me the money."

"I don't owe you nothing!" Bernie's voice gets a notch louder. "I think the FBI would like to know about this!"

"What the fuck are you talking about FBI?"

And they go off! Bernie's barely discernible Bahamian accent against Gino's Little Italy dialect. Pacing the floor, arms flailing, the volume going up with each volley. I don't know what Bernie was saying. Just a lot of Bahamian sounding gibberish heavily laced with variations on the "FBI." Gino countered with Italian curses most of which I understood from my Italian American upbringing. I stepped back a few paces. These are big boys with a combined weight of at least 500 pounds. If this goes to blows I did not want to be collateral damage. After a little while Gino throws up his hands backs away. I think he realizes this is not a rational discussion. Bernie is not about to give this guy 10 grand.

"I will be back! You owe me \$10,000 plus interest." Yells Gino as he exits.

"Yeah, the FBI wants to know about this interest!" Bernie yells after him.

Bernie, still aggravated, says to me. "That mother fucker thinks he's a tough guy." "Did you see how up tight he got when I mentioned about the FBI!"

"He's one of those low end Mafia guys. They shit their pants when you bring in the FBI. He ain't going to do shit."

Only thing that was more ridiculous than Bernie coming up with \$10,000 was the idea of him voluntarily going anywhere near a law enforcement officer such as the FBI.

We were barely covering operating expenses, which did not include any salary for me. It was an all cash business. To my knowledge, there was no bank account let alone operating capital. The musicians got from \$600 to \$1,200 for the week for the band! The bartender was smart enough to take his pay out of the cash register every night. I was fortunate to have a wife with a job that paid the rent. I received about \$1,000 pay for the entire 6 months that I worked there (that is not a typo, 4 digits)

As irresponsible as Bernie was, I have to give him credit for one important thing. He booked great talent. There was never any restriction on the music. The stage

belonged to the musicians! I was often amazed at the quality of players he got to work in this small club that could not afford to pay anything near what they were worth. McCoy Tyner was a prime example.



McCoy Tyner

McCoy was renown as an integral member of the Coltrane's trail blazing quartet. His extended solo on My Favorite Things, helped make that tune perhaps the most well know and loved piece of modal jazz. For all the power in his playing, he seemed quite shy. He turned the piano around so he was blocked from view of the audience. At first I thought this was accidental. So I turned the piano around so the patrons could see him as he played. When he came to the gig he turned it back.

Sonny Fortune was on saxophone and Calvin Hill played the bass. They played a great set. At the end of the evening Calvin Hill asked me if it was safe to leave his bass in the club over night. I showed him the 5 inch thick door with 3 locks and the trip wire which was a about a foot off the ground. If some one hit it an alarm was supposed to be triggered. (I never saw it work.) There was no other door or window entrance (Talk about a firetrap! An old wooden floor covered with saw dust and 1 narrow doorway)

When I came to work the next day I was shocked to find the door unlocked. I thought Bernie must have come in early but he was not there. Neither was the liquor nor Calvin's bass. In the back of the club, near the rest rooms was an air vent that went into the hallway and stairs to the apartments above the club. Thieves had entered the building through the hallway, torn out the vent and broke down enough of the wall to crawl through. Once they got in they unlocked the doors and made off with all they could carry. Needless to say, I was quite distressed!

Amazingly, in about a half hour one of the local musicians showed up with Calvin's bass!

"I was coming home about 4am when I seen this cat running down the street with the bass!" he said.

"I knew something was up by the way he was dragging the instrument. And he looked like a junkie. And I knew Slug's was right around the corner. He was in bad shape, like he needed a fix right way. So I gave him \$10. and he took off leaving me with the bass. "

Unbelievable! There you have the dichotomy of the scene. It was dreadful that thieves were so desperate that they ripped down the wall. And it was beautiful that the bass came back, it seems, through the power of the jazz community.

DESPERATION

It was a great relief to have the bass back but all the liquor was gone! In New York State, holders of liquor licenses must buy their liquor from a wholesaler. We already owed that guy a lot of money so he was not likely to restock the bar. Fortunately the beer was on tap. The thief couldn't take that. I scraped up a few bucks and bought cheap bottles of gin, vodka and scotch. We had to have some thing to sell to customers. I'll never know if this burglary was set up by Gino or just a coincidence to happen right after his threats.

It was August and the next act booked was Chico Hamilton, the west coast drummer. He traveled with his brother/manager Tommy. From my point of view they were the nicest guys that played at Slug's. They sat and talked to me and treated me like a colleague. Their music was advanced but accessible. Chico was famous for hiring good young players especially guitarists. This booking was no exception. On guitar he had an unknown John Abercrombie just at the beginning of an illustrious career. He also had a young saxophonist who played his horn through an electric processing device that distorted the sound like a guitar wha-wha pedal. It did not mix well with the sound of the band. I guess Chico was trying to be contemporary but this band was not Chico's finest hour.



Chico Hamilton

The lower east side of NYC in August was hot, sticky and uncomfortable. Anybody who could get out of town left. If you had to stay in town, you stayed next to the air conditioning. Very few made it to Slugs.

As always, a few supportive musicians showed up. Freddy Hubbard was among them. Unfortunately he was very high, certainly on alcohol and who knows what else. And he was embarrassingly loud from his perch at the bar.

"What is this shit? This ain't Chico's music! This is those kids he's playing with. That's why nobody comes! I play here, I pack the place."

Chico took it in stride.

He was booked for 6 nights at a very low rate. After the set on the second night he asked to get some of his pay. There was almost nothing in the cash register. He was supposed to get \$600. for the whole band for the week. He wanted half now. This was totally reasonable. I looked in the cash register. Jim has taken out his pay leaving less than \$100.

Bernie had been working on a deal to move the club to larger building in a safer neighborhood. He had picked out a building on Thompson Street in the Village. We

went to look at it one afternoon with George, a young black man who worked with a group that was supposed to help develop minority owned businesses. Bernie had a fantasy of opening up the new building with Pharaoh Saunders performing. Pharaoh was at the height of his popularity. He was considered to be the major spiritual and musical descendent of John Coltrane. Bernie told me Pharaoh had an exclusive contract that limited him to playing only in Slugs when he played on Manhattan in NYC. I never saw him anywhere near Slugs. Although one time Bernie and I ran into him on the street. He told us to check with his manager to book a date. That never happened.

Anyway, back to Chico Hamilton. We had no money to pay him. Desperate we tried to placate him by promising that he would be on a double bill with Pharaoh at the premier of the new Slugs in the Village. Some how I was designated as the one tell this to Chico. As I was heard myself explain that we had no money right now but we are going to give him this great opportunity to play in this club we didn't yet have, I realized how bogus I sounded. Chico reaction was something like this;

" Knock off this Mutt and Jeff routine you and Bernie are trying to run. I need my money!" I felt like shit.

I could handle cleaning up and sweeping the floor. Every day I had to take what money we had to restock the bar with the cheapest liquor I could find so we had



some thing to sell that evening. I could deal with that along with no pay. But I could not handle feeling like a fraud. Not being able to pay what we had promised to the musicians was too much. I had been motivated by thinking I was part of some thing great. We were providing a space for outstanding performers to present their art. Now, I was anxiety ridden and ashamed. I was just another white guy exploiting the mostly black musicians. I hated that!

The next week we had Joe Henderson. It has been said that for the first couple years of a great jazz musicians career they call him a Young Lion

and the last few years they are Old Masters. They can make some decent money in the beginning and end but the 20 or 30 years in between can be a struggle. Joe was a bit past the Young Lion stage. In fact, he had quit playing for a while and this appearance at Slugs was supposed to be part of his come back. The first night of his gig, just before he was supposed to hit, Joe came in very upset.

“Chico Hamilton is outside saying he hasn’t been paid.” He says.

I assured him that Slug’s always paid the musician and Chico will get paid. I would have paid him out of my own pocket if there was any money in it. In my heart I had little faith that the money would be paid.

A lot of Joe’s musician friends showed up to support him but not many of the general public made it. It was Slug’s policy not to charge admission to musicians. It was not a lucrative week. We had hoped to make enough from Joe to pay Chico. Now it looked like we were going to owe both of them.

THE LAST STRAW

I had to take a break. My wife and I took a couple of days off to visit friends in Woodstock, in the Catskills about 100 miles north of the City. What a refreshing change. The mountains and fresh air seemed to wash away the grit and smog of the city. The lovely village green where craft stores and artist galleries mixed with hardware stores and auto repair shops. The Sixties were still alive as young people flocked to the town searching for the fields where the giant music festival was. That historic event bore the name of the town but was actually 50 miles to the south. We had a great, relaxing few days. Reluctantly we headed back to the city.

When we got to our apartment the door was wide open. There had been only one thing of value in the place, a good quality stereo record player. It was gone. As best we could figure, the thieves came over the roof onto our patio. With a hacksaw they cut out one of the iron bars on the window. Then they used the bar to pry the grate enough to fit an arm in holding a bolt cutter and cut the combination lock that held the grate in place.

This was pretty much the last straw. Our Woodstock friends offered to put us up in their house and gave me a job in their factory until we got on our feet. But that’s a different story.

It was October when we left NYC. Slug’s closed before the end of the year. I was sad to hear it had closed but awfully glad I wasn’t there for the death throws.

Afterward.

I don’t think Bernie was a villain. Today they might say he suffered from posttraumatic stress. Besides the daily tension of running a nightclub in perhaps the toughest neighborhood in NYC, Lee Morgan was shot to death right in front of him. He took the gun out of the woman’s hand. No one said “Gee Bernie, that must have been terrible. How are you feeling?” In 1972 we didn’t know much about “emotional support” Is it any wonder that he found relief in narcotics? Just sitting here writing these words I can feel my own anxiety rising.

When I left, Bernie swore he would get me \$12,000 which is what I was expected to be paid for my work. I never saw the money. In fact, I never saw Bernie again. I don't know if Joe or Chico or Gino or Jerry ever got paid. Twice over the last 45 years I heard he was in Florida.

P and B's parents didn't get their money back but they did get the piano from Slugs. It was brought to a Universalist church in upstate New York where the parents were congregants. Francesca Tanksley, the brilliant pianist and, in my opinion the most accomplished disciple of McCoy Tyner, also belonged to that congregation and she had the opportunity to play it.

When jazz followers and fans meet there is sometimes an unacknowledged competition that I call "Hipper Than Thou" The players are any two or more folks that are trying to impress one another about their knowledge and personal interaction with jazz and musicians. This is usually a friendly way to get to know someone. But some times it can get a bit antagonistic. For years, when ever I found myself in this situation where I felt the other person is a little too full of themselves, I let slip a bit of my Slugs experience and the competition is over. I got a lot of street creds from a few months at Slugs.

Recently I was out to dinner at a restaurant where a jazz trio was playing. These were older seasoned players who I knew a little. I was very surprised they had never heard of Slugs. So I decided to try to immortalize at least as much as I had experienced. It's a little bit of jazz history. I hope it won't be lost forever.

MUSICIAN WHO PLAYED SLUGS WHILE I WAS THERE that I can remember.

*Max Roach, Odean Pope, Chico Hamilton, John Abercrombie, Glen Moore, Larry Coryell, Steve Marcus, Alphonse Mouson, Joe Henderson, Jo-Ann Brackeen, Hal Galpers, Bobby Humphries, Archie Shepp, Rashied Ali, Jimmy Garrison, Paul Chambers, Junior Cook, McCoy Tyner, Calvin Hill, George Gable, Freddy Hubbard, Leon Thomas, Pee Wee Ellis, Sun Ra (and the 20 piece orchestra) John Gilmore, Pat Patric (father of Deval Patric governor of Mass), Sunny Murray, John Blair, Roy Haynes, Don Pullen, George Adams, Doug Carns, Jackie McClean, Clifford Jordan and Mike Mandel Hal Galpers.

I hope you enjoy it. Are you impressed? Am I hip enough?

Tom Colello
April 2019
Saugerties, NY