

STATE STREET SATURDAY NIGHT

The chalkboard sign on the cracked sidewalk outside the small club near the state Capitol advertises “Jazz tonight. No cover.” My kind of entertainment—free. Even though I'm in Madison, the prospect of hearing some serious bebop or post-modern swing ferments in my mind all day. Jazz in Mad City, Wisconsin, USA sounds as incongruous as opera in Orlando or bluegrass in Boston.

By dinnertime, I have a serious jones for jazz. I don't care that I'm not in New York or Chicago. I gotta get back to that club. So I hit the pavement. All that stands between me and a musical high is navigating State Street on a Saturday night. Even in April, the vibe on State is so alive, so intense, so energized, that my feet buzz as if I'm walking across a red-hot frying pan in wet shoes.

The collegians have swarmed onto State for their weekly ritual of blowing off steam, winding down, hooking up, anything to obliterate the drudgery or misery from their academic lives for a few hours. Something might happen, and no one wants to miss some ... thing.

I pass stick-figure coeds wearing skinny jeans painted onto their bulimic butts, walking the walk in heels high enough to make them appear even skinnier. Or wearing clunky boots that make their feet look like little girls' feet in Mom's shoes. Style. Go figure.

The beautiful girls, even the merely pretty girls, don't make eye contact, but do see everything. They need to know who's watching them. They need to evaluate everybody else. Compare and rate. "I'm better than those losers." Look bored, act cool, cry inside. "No one loves me, but someone will if I look a little more perfect than her." "Her" happens to be the gorgeous, talented friend who is only her friend because she needs someone lesser to hang with in order to elevate her own tenuous self-image.

These scared, confused beauties flip their hair just right, lower their chins just right, arch an eyebrow just right, don't smile at any guy except their boyfriend or gayfriend. They don't want to encourage anyone, don't want a scene, don't want to get raped, don't want to die, but still want to believe they're living on the edge tonight. Funny because Madtown ain't close to anyone's edge. The real edge is in the Middle East where young people live with the daily dread of getting blown to bloody bits by a suicide bomber. Or maybe they *are* the suicide bomber because life in their country is so screwed up that suicide bombing seems like a promising career path. *That's* life on the edge. In Madtown, the edge is the part of the pool where it drops off over your head and Mom isn't watching but the lifeguard is.

To the State Street guys, living on the edge means risking arrest for public intoxication, maybe getting into a bar fight. Most seem to be every degree of high one can attain. Pot, pills, Pabst Blue Ribbon, whatever is available and cheap. They come out of hibernation after a shitty, sloppy winter and gotta get laid. Gotta be high to do it, because no babe wants their sober selves, so they gotta be the life of the party. "That's what women want, right?" The more desperate the girl, the better. Insecure, self-conscious, pretty in the right light, certainly not a supermodel. Just cute enough and thin enough to tolerate for a hookup, as long as she has big boobs. It'll be dark soon, and most women will look doable by midnight.

Although Saturday night starts earlier as spring progresses and no one's falling for his particular brand of charm, Joe College will probably strike out tonight, like every other Saturday, because he's as insecure as the women he hunts. He secretly wishes he were back in high school, feeling up his cheerleader girlfriend who wanted to pretend she was in love with him, but had figured out if she played easy, every guy would love her. Life was so easy then.

State Street is the United Nations of sounds, sights, and smells. Conversations in Chinese, Japanese, Hindu, Arabic, Farsi, German, Spanish, French, even English echo off the buildings. Male, female, straight, gay, alphabet soup. Djellebas, saris, hijabs, biker jackets, blue jeans, camouflage, slogan t-shirts, shabby chic create a sea of color in front of the monochrome storefronts and gray pavement.

The people are all colors except black and white. That's bullshit. That's people wanting a few simple boxes in which to put seven billion unique individuals. No one is actual black or actual white. Not even gray. Ever see a gray human? Only gray hair, man.

Everyone's a shade of brown. Darkest are the Africans undiluted since the dawn of man. They qualify as dark chocolate brown. Then you've got cocoa. Then bronze. Ochre. Burnt umber. Coffee. Caramel. Smoked honey. Butternut. What about flesh-colored skin? Hah. That's a stereotype perpetuated by Crayola before being politically correct was politically correct. Tan. Beige. Taupe. Yada, yada, who cares? There must be twenty crayons in the 128-color box that are some sort of human skin color. Doesn't matter to me. If you like jazz, you're my friend.

The multitude of food aromas swirl and mingle, mimicking the human ebb and flow. Garlic and olive oil, curry and coriander, coffee and chocolate, grilled meat and fried whatever, soy and sushi. Each step makes me hungrier. The best aromas threaten to hook their fingers into my nostrils and pull me into their kitchens. But the scent of jazz keeps me walking.

I gave up performing years ago. All I have left is listening. Hard, concentrated listening. Live music is always the best, but what sucks is no one actually listens any more. They eat, read, text, talk over this great music, and treat it like muzak. Something to fill the silent void of their lives.

Great music transports a person to another world just like a great book, a great play, or a great piece of art. Takes your mind by the ears, flies you over the rainbow, slices open your guts, gives you a glimpse deep inside yourself of what constitutes your most basic level of humanity. Hear, listen, sing, dance, rejoice, live. And then, if enough listeners are wowed by the playing and let the performers know it, the musicians absorb that extra energy and reciprocate with another step higher, then another, nonstop, until the audience and performers are exhausted. Rock musicians playing in football stadiums have the corner on the energy market, whipping 50,000 kids into a frenzy that builds upon itself until the stadium erupts into a synergistic volcano and everyone, musicians and listeners, is swept away on a rock-and-roll lava flow.

I arrive at the club, sit down at the bar, order dinner and a drink, listen to the piped in music. Sinatra backed by the Basie band, Tatum, Bird, Diz, Cannonball, Duke Ellington. Great stuff. Classic stuff. Not smooth jazz, or fusion, or atonal mumbo-jumbo with no beat, no rhythm, no melody, no chord progression, no logic. I'm old fashioned that way. I like songs that compel me to hum along, tap my foot, play air drums or air bass, hell, dance if I'm energized enough.

The joint slowly fills up. Everyone chows down, clinks glasses, talks, laughs, warms the room with body heat. The band saunters onto the nonexistent stage, just one corner of the small dance floor, and prepares to play. I turn around, my back against the bar, sip a damn decent Pinot Noir. Gotta drink wine with jazz. My fingers tingle with anticipation, hoping tonight's performance might be special. One of a kind special. Blow me away special.

Piano, bass, drums, and trumpet. Cool. I don't expect transcendence, just hard-driving swing, a band with integrity, musicians preserving the tradition, keeping the flame of creativity alive. Once civilization loses the power to dream, to imagine, to create, we're doomed. Creativity built everything humanly great in the world.

The suits and the rulers want to kill creativity and or tax it to death, or at least regulate the creativity out of creativity. Like "It's okay to create, just don't invent anything new, or do anything different. Only create from nine to five. If you create, make sure we approve your license first. When you're done creating, send half of your creation to us, or we'll arrest you or take all your creations or confiscate all your stuff or bomb the hell out of your home or all of the above."

The trumpeter's no Miles, but the cat possesses serious chops. Lots of range, great technique, imaginative for a white ... I mean beige ... guy. The stereotype is beige guys can't swing, can't improvise, can't play jazz. Like all stereotypes, there's some truth to it. I'll admit I'm biased. Give me a black ... I mean brown ... jazz musician any day, because I'm ninety-nine percent sure he'll play my ears off. There are exceptions, beige guys who are damn decent, but there are few brown jazz musicians for whom I won't pay money to hear. Just the way it is. I don't know why. Call it differences in culture, class, upbringing, three centuries of oppression, maybe even music as a cheap form of entertainment, sort of like basketball. Once you've got an instrument, making music is free. But I'll take any color jazz over all other kinds of music.

Some young pretenders walk in fashionably late. Screw that fashionable crap. Catch the music from note one, man. And leave the stupid pork pie hat at home. I'll suffer with your black t-shirt, sport coat, and pointy-toed suede shoes, but come on, fool, a pork pie hat? You think you're a brown jazzman from the 50's or something? You're a privileged beige nobody from

suburban Mad City who thinks he's the baddest jazz fan in the state, which ain't saying much. But even so, can you tell me who comprised Miles' rhythm section when he recorded the best selling jazz album of all time, *Kind of Blue*? I figured not, so quit pretending you were best friends with Art Tatum, or Bird, or Diz, or Lester freakin' Young. I try to block out the pretenders, the wannabes, the don't-give-a-shit-just-want-people-to-think-I'm-cool-or-hip, or whatever today's twenty-somethings use to define maximum social acceptance. But they sit between the band and me. Damn. Now I gotta look at the back of their pork pie heads all night.

By the way, Miles' rhythm section on *Kind of Blue* was Bill Evans piano (Wynton Kelly replaced him on one track), Paul Chambers bass, Jimmy Cobb drums. Cannonball and Coltrane on alto and tenor sax, respectively. *Kind of Blue* puts a lot of people to sleep. Non-jazz fans don't understand. Don't know what the big deal was. Except the big deal was the biggest deal. Miles and that band freed the improvisation from the rigid structure of chord changes. That was huge. Interpreting the song or the lyrics was no longer limited to twelve, sixteen, or thirty-two measures on top of formulaic chord changes. Modality replaced tonality. Improvisation switched from chord-based to scale-based. Melody became subservient to mood. In the mood became in the mode. All that mattered was where your creativity could take the listener, and those cats went on some lo-o-o-ong voyages. *Kind of Blue* rocketed that style to the forefront of modern jazz.

The first set flies by. The band sets a mellow tone. Lots of minor-key tunes. Maybe they're depressed, like I am, by the lack of attention from the audience. Regardless, they're tight and listen to each other. Integrity.

A guy about my age settles onto the barstool next to me before the set ends and listens intently. He says hi to the bartender, who knows him, and orders a beer. We talk during the break, mostly about music. He tells me most of his life story. I share a little of mine. He's a true

music fan, no pork pie hat. Knows reams of stuff about the Beatles. We agree that the Beatles are the Most Influential Band of All Time. Like me, he understands they had ripped off the great early rock-and-rollers and blues artists, who in turn had ripped off the jazz masters of the early 20th Century, who in turn based their music on the Western classical music structure. That's what music does, evolves from one generation to the next, each generation takes what works for them, improves on earlier perfection, always searches for the new. But now everyone rips off the Beatles, and they'll continue ripping them off for centuries. That imitation-flattery thing gone exponential.

The second set's about to start. I'm stoked. I know the band will turn up the fire, get the crowd into their sound, impress me more than once. I'm mildly buzzed on wine. The crowd's buzzed on whatever they're drinking. The band kicks off an up-tempo tune, and the ride begins in earnest. Sitting on my barstool, motionless except for my tapping toes, every molecule in my body vibrates to the beat.

Live performance is what jazz cats live for, and improvisation is the heart and soul of live jazz. On the spot, tear a riff from the top of your head, faster than electricity. Improvisation. Listen to the rhythm section, so when the pianist fires back a variation on the "I Got Rhythm" chord changes with diminished ninths and augmented fifths and the drummer suggests a rhythmic phrase with a rat-tat-a-tat on his snare, you slide right into that variation with the ostinato phrase you've been repeating for ten seconds, which is a lifetime in improv. This builds the tension so tight the audience thinks either you must be screwing with them, or that's all you've got to say musically and are stalling. They wonder, "When the hell is he going to play something different?"

Then you change the riff by one note, then another, and another, and the tension releases into the room, into the audience's collective psyches. Eyes light up and the good listeners say to themselves, "Oh, man what a great segue," or "Damn, those guys really listen to each other. Brilliant." Hyperbole like that, only more emotional, intense, visceral the way only music can evoke a feeling.

You soar into a flight of musical fancy that builds on what you just played, only more complex, until your fingers can't fly any faster, your chops scream for some sort of rest, you're tapped out of ideas for this tune. So you distill what you've played, simplify, wind it down to an essence of two or three notes, maybe one rhythmic motif, fade off at the end of the chorus, and let the piano player run with what you gave him—a piece of your soul. For free.

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After midnight, as I walk back to my hotel, the night owls and the heavy partiers dominate State. A stupid-drunk Frat Boy, barely standing, has no idea how pathetic he looks, but tells me I resemble Bill Gates. In his condition, I should give him props for knowing who Bill Gates is.

A young couple fights quietly on the corner. They speak in whispers, but their body language shouts. She's pissed at him. What the hell did he do? She won't take his crap anymore, wants to break up, but her tears say she's afraid to lose him. He's pissed. All he wants is to get laid on a regular basis with a minimum amount of drama in his life. This will only get worse, explode when they get back to her place, assuming he finds a way to charm her into putting up with his bullshit for one more night of sex that is meaningless to him, soul emptying to her.

Panhandlers, winos, and crazy people litter the sidewalks and doorways like cigarette butts, dog shit, and used condoms behind back alley dumpsters. Smelly, disgusting, something

we'd rather not acknowledge. The revelers pass by the freaks, pretending they don't exist, but a few guilt-laden bleeding hearts drop a quarter into a cup. God forbid they make eye contact.

If the partiers are with friends, they might have some laughs: shove the freaks around, hassle them, tell them to get the hell off State and go hang out in the poor neighborhoods. "Don't mess up my idyllic college experience by drooling all over my shoes, ya fuckin' loser." These guys usually save that anger for closing time, after they strike out and need to release their bursting-at-the-seams sexual frustration. So why not get into a fight with a helpless, spaced out bum?

Tonight must be prom night for the Greek crowd. Certain groups of guys are dressed sharp, and the females in their herd wear cocktail costumes cut down to there and slit up to here. Street legal lingerie. The Sor Girls really, truly, desperately believe they look glamorous. My impression? Cockteasing narcissists. Their eyes have that look: excited, afraid, thinking they're real grownups, anticipating true love or romance or just a good banging from their boyfriend.

I've never understood fraternity life: endless parties, binge drinking, casual sex, cliques, feeling superior to the unbeautiful poor students who don't bother to hide their contempt for the Greek gods and goddesses. Success in life is simply a popularity contest to the Frat Boys and Sor Girls. The more people you surround yourself with who are equally afraid of introspection, the more popular you become. Ergo, life is a party at which to get wasted, because we're all successful and this will last forever. Or at least until mom and dad stop writing tuition checks.

No matter. I'm back at my hotel in my own quiet world. I got my fix. High on jazz, I'm good for a long time. I kick off my shoes, lay on the bed. My feet buzz.