



# Music Makers

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# MUSIC MAKERS

WHEN JAKE WAS INTERVIEWED for the job at the magazine Music Makers he had admitted that he knew little or nothing about music. The response from the magazine was the only one he had received from a couple of dozen resumés and he knew it was not helping to say that, but he felt he had to reveal his limitations up front.

Marsha, the editor across the desk that day, had nodded. “We have critics and reviewers. I read your stories from that newspaper in—Where was it? Muncie? Anyway, I like the way you write. What we would want from you are more of the same kind of thing. Profiles of up-and-coming new artists, personal stories, bring them to the attention of a larger audience.”

That had been seventeen months earlier, and six months after that he had started to send out resumés again. What he was writing was no more than filler. A thousand word story hacked to five hundred words, seven hundred, whatever was needed to finish filling a page.

He had stared at Marsha when given the present assignment. “Up and coming artist? The guy was ninety-two when he died!”

“He was a very important figure to a lot of world-famous musicians. He deserves more than a routine obit, which is all he got.”

And that was that, Jake thought gloomily, driving a rental car through a commercial section on the outskirts of Memphis, Tennessee. A strip mall, gas stations, mattress store, a used car lot... He slowed down as a white fence, a deep lawn, big magnolia tree came into view. After checking the number, he pulled to the curb, parked, and glanced again at the name in his notes, Luellen Germaine, the old man’s life-long companion or something. An hour, he had already decided, was all he needed here, the rest could

be lifted from Google or Wikipedia.

The house was a three-story white frame building with blue trim, surrounded by a lot of shrubs and plants in bloom. The house seemed to be in good shape, well maintained, as out of place in this neighborhood as he was looking for a new up-and-coming artist, or an old one who had died a week before.

He walked onto a wide porch with planter boxes of blooming geraniums. It was eleven, he was right on time.

Luellen Germaine opened the door and said, "Mr. Manfred? I'm Luellen. Come on in." He was younger than she had expected. Dark hair just a little too long, dark eyes, tall and not at all athletic looking. Strip him down, she thought looking him over, and he probably would be pale and scrawny, plucked chicken came to mind, but since he was wearing a rumpled sport coat and jeans, it was hard to tell. "We'll go this way," she said, motioning for him to follow her.

He entered a wide, bright foyer that had several good urns with potted plants. On one side an archway opened to a sunken room, with broad stairs leading down a couple of feet to a room that appeared to be stadium-sized. Passing it, he could see more plants, groups of chairs, sofas flanking a fireplace... Another broad staircase led up from the foyer.

She kept walking past the stairs. "I thought we'd be more comfortable in the family room," she said. "In here."

She had stopped at a doorway and motioned for him to enter. This room looked out over the back of the property with flower beds and lawn, and beyond them a massive oak tree dripping Spanish moss, and what looked like a meadow crammed with blooming flowers. Modern America out front, turn of the century in back, he thought.

Rattan furnishings with lime green cushions, a pale rose-colored rug, and sheer white curtains at wide windows made the room look like one out of a decorator magazine. The curtains were held back by rose-colored sashes. Jake felt as if he should go back to the porch and wipe his feet, then come in a second time.

Luellen sat down and motioned for him to be seated. She was a light black woman, slender, her face unlined, her hair silver,

age impossible to guess. The old man's faithful lover/companion? Servant? She acted as if she owned the place, he thought uneasily, aware that he had not done enough homework.

"Now, Mr. Manfred, why does your magazine want to do an article about Bob Wranger?"

"We profile people who are important in the music world," he said.

"But he isn't, now is he? Maybe at one time, but that was long ago."

"He influenced many of the great artists, introduced some of them, and that makes him important," Jake said.

"And most of them are as dead as he is," she said in a gentle, chiding tone.

Jake knew he was losing this interview and he didn't understand how or why it had happened, but Luellen had taken control and he was left feeling almost tongue-tied. He pulled his notebook from his pocket and flipped it open in a business-like manner. When he glanced at her again, she was smiling faintly.

"Why don't you just go ahead and ask me a few questions?" she said in that same gentle tone she had used before.

She had a nice voice, low pitched and somehow intimate. It was her accent, he decided. It was beguiling.

When he didn't immediately ask a question, she said, "I imagine the first thing we should tend to is whether I was Bob's paramour, his lover. And the answer is no. He loved Leo Corning and had for sixty years or more. I was the singer of the group."

"He was gay?" There had not been even a hint of that in any of the obits he had skimmed.

"Homosexual," she said. "Somehow the word gay diminishes the love people can have for each other. When I was young," she added, "gay meant happy, carefree, and brought to mind little girls dancing in a meadow."

"When did he move his group here to Memphis?" Jake asked.

"Times were changing, music was changing," she said. "The Beatles came along, and Elvis, hard rock, heavy metal. A lot of musicians changed along with the taste, and went to where they could make a living. Fewer and fewer folks seemed to care about

jazz and the blues. Bob's mother died along about the time he was hitting bottom and she left him the house. He grew up here, the baby in a family of four girls, an elderly aunt, a father who was a lawyer, then a judge, and a mother who played the organ in church and who ordered him to keep away from her piano if he couldn't play proper music. He left when he was eighteen, turned up in New Orleans and found a place where he didn't feel like a sinner among angels. We, some of the group, came here forty-two years ago. Bob and Leo are still here, their ashes out yonder under the oak tree. When it's my turn, I'll be there, too."

Jake felt his skin prickle with her words. Too quickly he asked, "Did the group play in a club in Memphis after the move?"

"We played right here in the house. Come, I'll show you."

She led him through another hallway and down a flight of stairs to a basement room. It was as big as the first room they had passed. One wall had been fitted with French doors and a row of high windows. In the end of the room a grand piano dominated the space. A drum set looked expensive and complete, and two chairs held a guitar and a clarinet. Half a dozen cabaret tables and small chairs were scattered about.

"Wow!" Jake said. "Your own club or something?"

"Beau Billy was with us at first," she said. "He took sick with cancer and died within a few months, and he told Bob to keep the drums and find someone who could use them." She nodded toward the chair with a clarinet. "That was Leo's. He passed four years ago. He could make music with anything he could blow—clarinet, trumpet, sax, a blade of grass." She was smiling as she spoke. "The horn stays with the house, too," she added. "The guitar's mine."

"Did he bequeath the house to you?" She looked healthy and vibrant, although she must have been at least seventy, but talking about her ashes going under the tree implied that she would be in this house when that time came.

"Oh no," she said. "The house now belongs to Bethany Stedman, a great, great, great niece. I don't really know how many greats should be there, but that will do. Bob left the piano to her daughter Cindy."

Two more players he had not heard of before, Jake thought. Did

it matter for the few hundred words he would be allowed?

“How will she get that piano up and out of a basement?” he asked, glancing at the stairs they had descended.

“Bob had folks in to excavate space out back and put in a ramp to move it from upstairs,” Luellen said. “It was in what his mother called the salon, that first room you see coming in. She held music soirees there. He could never play his kind of music in her salon, you see, and he didn’t intend to start. He had it moved.” She paused a moment, then said, “I’ll play a tape we made before Leo passed, just the three of us. It isn’t studio quality, but you’ll get the idea.” She walked to a cabinet against the wall and brought out a tape player. “While you’re listening, I’ll go make some lemonade. Just push the button when you’re done. If you’d like, you could go out through the door there, up the ramp, and visit with Bob and Leo under the oak tree.”

He gave her a searching look, but she was engrossed with the tape recorder. Visit with two very old, very dead men? Not bloody likely, he thought, glancing at his watch. Ten minutes and he would be out of here. He had enough to fill his allotted space, just another meaningless puff piece.

As the music started, Luellen went up the stairs.

A very simple piano began with the opening phrases of “Blues in the Night.” The melody got more complicated with riffs and the clarinet joined in, with a guitar in the background. A three way uninhibited dialog began, with them interrupting one another, improvising, building, and then Luellen was singing the words in a plaintive voice, a clear, beautiful contralto voice. “My mama done told me, when I was in pigtails...” She was drowned out by the clarinet and a piano that sounded manic.

After a time, her voice cut in, over-rote them, and she had the stage. “She told me, she warned me: Honey, you’ll sing the blues...” She had few more lines before the clarinet drowned her out, and there was what Jake could only think of as a food fight, a three-way jam with first one then the other dominating, improvising.

“That lonesome whistle, dear lord that lonesome whistle...” The clarinet sounded eerily like a train whistle, then overwhelmed her

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# KATE WILHELM



Kate Wilhelm's first short story, "The Pint-Sized Genie" was published in *Fantastic Stories* in 1956. Her first novel, *More Bitter Than Death*, a mystery, was published in 1963. Over the span of her career, her writing has crossed over the genres of science fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy and magical realism, psychological suspense, mimetic, comic, family sagas, a multimedia stage production, and radio plays. She has recently returned to writing mysteries with her Barbara Holloway and the Charlie Meiklejohn and Constance Leidl Mysteries novels. Her works have been adapted for television, theater, and movies in the United States, England, and Germany. Wilhelm's novels and stories have been translated to more than a dozen languages. She has contributed to *Redbook*, *Quark*, *Orbit*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Locus*, *Amazing*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Ellery Queen's Mysteries*, *Fantastic Stories*, *Omni* and many others.

Kate and her husband, Damon Knight (1922-2002), also provided invaluable assistance to numerous other writers over the years. Their teaching careers covered a span of several decades, and hundreds of students, many of whom are famous names in the field today. Kate and Damon helped to establish the Clarion Writer's Workshop and the Milford Writer's Conference. They have lectured together at universities in North and South America and Asia. They have been the guests of honor and panelists at numerous conventions around the world. Kate continues to host monthly workshops, as well as teach at other events. She is an avid supporter of local libraries.

Kate Wilhelm lives in Eugene, Oregon.