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Finleak

The waiter can sing like Sinatra, customers become performers, and the chick who runs the joint gives you a sketchbook. **Bill Leak** tells of his ultimate bliss in the Big Apple

THE old bloke at the bar with the beret and the sexy young girlfriend has got one of those big noses that's just crying out to be drawn. I've got a pen or two in my pocket so I grab a serviette and try, discreetly, to get a start on him.

The bar's getting crowded and two large men interpose themselves between me and my new-found model and I can't get a glimpse of him for love or money. I wait patiently for them to move, but when finally they do, the old bloke's gone and someone else is sitting in his place.

Damn! I'm off to a flying start with this one — I've already got most of the profile down and just needed a good look at the shoulders and the hair to finish it off.

Oh well, such is the lot of the bar-room caricaturist. I'll get started on the piano player instead. He looks like Duke Ellington with Don Chipp's wrinkles. He's also one of the coolest pianists I've ever heard — understated and subtle when accompanying the other musicians, gutsy and brilliant when doing a solo. Great fistfuls of notes, 10 at a time, astonishing, beautifully shaped ribbons of melody and all so elegant — just so elegant.

This dazzling music is pouring out of

this man and it's costing him no effort whatsoever. From the look on his face you'd swear he was doing something about as exciting as waiting for his soup to cool down, but then you have a look at **his hands and they're fluttering away** like a hummingbird's wings. Oscar Peterson could learn a thing or two from this guy who, I'm reliably informed, is called Harry Wittaker and he's a legend. The drawing's going well too. Then again, with that bottom lip it was never going to be hard.

So I keep coming back to this place. It's called Arturo's and it's in Greenwich Village. It's one of those places where musicians congregate and play, regardless of whether they've been booked to or not. Consequently every night is full of surprises and the music is always astonishingly good. The food's great, too.

One night I turn up and Arturo's daughter, Lisa, who runs the place, tells me she's sick and tired of me doing all my drawings on napkins, and presents me with a magnificent, leather-bound book of quality drawing paper and demands that, from now on, I do my drawings in that.

Suddenly I'm the Toulouse-Lautrec of Greenwich Village. I'm no longer scribbling furtively, surreptitiously in the corner. I've got my important-

looking book spread out on a table with the food and the drinks jockeying for position around it.

Lisa checks out the collection and can't believe I've been stupid enough to draw on the pages of tissue paper that separate each piece of real paper from the next.

I realise this is not really a drawing book, it's a scrapbook. "How was I to know?" I say, "it's bloody dark in here."

The old bloke with the beret is back and this time I get a better look at him and manage to finish his drawing. Lisa tells me his name is Carl Thompson and gives me a disdainful look that seems to say, "You mean you've never *heard* of Carl Thompson?"

The next time I see him he's playing with the band and I make the casual remark that his is the weirdest-looking bass I've ever seen. This is overheard by his sexy young girlfriend, who informs me that he is a master instrument maker and that I am looking at the Stradivarius of bass guitars. Be that as it may, it soon becomes apparent that Carl is undoubtedly the Paganini of bass players and so, chastened, I decide that, in future, I'd better keep such comments to myself.

The coincidences are starting to pile up.

One night I sketch and find myself

talking to a brilliant Texan pianist named (rather wonderfully) John Gentry Tennyson, who tells me he has a close friend who plays drums and percussion and lives in Australia, but "in Canberra, so I guess you wouldn't know him."

"Probably not, but what's his name, anyway?"

"Gary Franz."

"Gary Bloody Franz! You're kidding me!"

The next morning I ring my sister in Canberra to tell her to pass on fond regards from Tennyson to our mate Gary Franz.

"Gary was around here for dinner last night," she says.

"You're kidding!"

Paul Nowinsky is a big, gentle, softly spoken bloke who rides to and from Arturo's on a pushbike with his bass strapped to his back. He plays quietly and unobtrusively and, every now and again, rips into a solo of such dazzling virtuosity that I find my jaw hitting the floor. While I'm struggling with my second attempt to draw him I ask John Tennyson what other musicians Paul has played with.

"Just about everybody," he says.

"Anyone that I might have heard of?"

"Well, you might have heard of Keith Richards."

Paul Frasier is one of those guys who is so irritatingly handsome that it's a waste of time for a caricaturist to even try to draw him. He tells me modestly that he's a bass player too and he often plays at Arturo's. He tells me he'll be in Australia in a week or two, touring with a band.

"Oh really? Who will you be playing with?"

"David Byrne," he says.

Jimmy is the waiter and he's always about as busy as a one-legged frog in a pit of starving pythons, but not tonight. Tonight is Thursday and on Thursdays, Jimmy sings. And boy, can Jimmy sing! Imagine Frank Sinatra, only with personality and charm, and that's Jimmy. I'm watching a performance worthy of the Sydney Opera House and I'm chewing on a pizza at the same time.

The delivery boy has dropped off his last takeaway for the night. He emerges from the kitchen with an alto sax and joins the other musicians who have accumulated around the piano and starts spraying notes around like Charlie Parker.

Lisa says, "Hey, that's Nick Hampton. He's just like you — he's from Sydney."

"Yes, just like me," I say, except that he's half my age, looks like a movie star and can also play like Charlie Parker.

I look at my watch and see that it's past midnight, so it's now my birthday. I

also realise that, in Australia, it has been my birthday for 16 hours, which means I'm younger over here than I am back home. It's a weird feeling.

Suddenly the band launches into *Happy Birthday* and, led by Jimmy, everyone in the place sings it with such warmth and gusto that I end up like a great big girl's blouse with tears streaming down my cheeks.

Lisa produces French champagne and, two hours later, I've had so much of it that I actually allow myself to get talked into playing something on the piano.

I'm a terrible pianist and abide by a very strict rule — never play when there's a musician in the room. And this room's full of them.

Mercifully, Pat O'Leary helps me to struggle through by providing a big cloud of rhythmic support and stability on his mighty double bass.

The contrast between his virtuosity and my ineptitude could not be greater. But I get a round of applause anyway, and why shouldn't I? It's my birthday!

If you're in New York City and you want to hear great music, don't waste your time trawling through the gig guides. Just head straight for Arturo's and say hi to Lisa for me. But if you want to draw caricatures, take your own book. There are still lots of pages left in mine and I intend to fill them up one day.