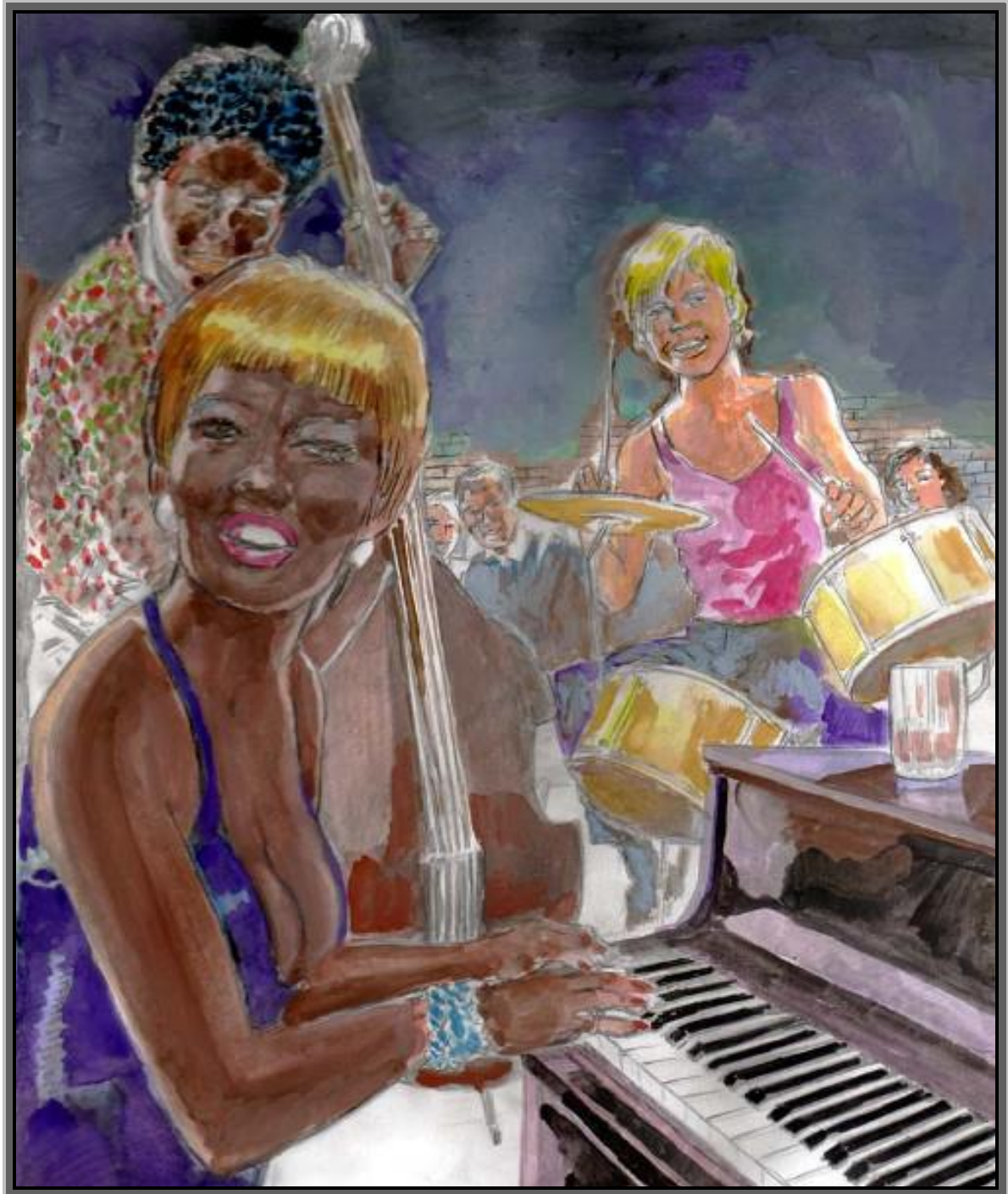


How High the Moon

Bradley Stoke



“How high...” sings Lynn. “How hi-igh... How high the moo-oo-oon!”

With echoes of Sarah Vaughan, she stretches the final word beyond its normal constraints, modulating the tone, while her fingers follow a little behind on the piano, finally resolving themselves in improvisation when she senses there is little more to be squeezed from one word.

The audience politely applauds as they recognise the change.

She smiles, although she is aware that she no longer resembles the slender Sarah Vaughan who first sang those words in the 1950s, but the older, fuller one of the 1970s who, unlike Lynn, had achieved enough fame that she could afford to ‘sell out’.

Selling out isn’t an option for Lynn. Neither her muse nor her record company, small though it is, would allow that. And her loyal following, scaled as modestly as Advanced Jazz Records, wouldn’t contemplate it either.

Tomasz, her drummer, nods with a smile as he takes Lynn’s cue to add his own improvised colour to the steady syncopated rhythm of the black notes on the keyboard. Paul strums the double bass with fingers as black as Lynn’s, his eyes closed and the grin on his face revealing the quiet ecstasy that always accompanies his playing. What an international trio they are: reflecting the cosmopolitan nature of Lynn’s adopted home of Manhattan. Tomasz from Poland, Paul from Alabama and Lynn from Peckham, a London suburb that seems bizarrely exotic set against the yellow taxis and steaming subways of the insomniac city.

The passage leads naturally to one of Lynn’s own compositions, but not one to which she is courageous enough to add lyrics. She knows she is no wordsmith, but she relishes the opportunity to scat over her own scales. The audience nods

appreciatively, but not so much as when, a bass and drum solo later, Lynn lets the touch of the orient in her own *Cairo Taxi Cab* flow into the thundering allure of Duke Ellington's *Caravan*. The more tutored ears in the Village Vanguard applaud wildly, joined by the rest when she at last sings: "Ni-ight and stars above that shine so bright: the mystery of their fading li-ight that shines upon our caravan..."

The model for her rendition is not the sassy one, but Ella Fitzgerald who surely once sang, as did Sarah Vaughan, in this very historic venue. Much as Lynn loves the American songbook and its great stars, she is a modern artist. Her performances have a character and flavour that is her own, and good enough that she can earn a booking here in Greenwich Village, to which she, in true Ellington style, has taken the A train. But respected as she is, it is a modest audience that shelter in the basement club away from the chill of a New York autumn (or 'fall' as she is learning to call it).

At last, Lynn senses that the variations she can squeeze from Duke Ellington's masterpiece have reached their term and she lets the number end with an ironic piano roll. The audience applauds and, twenty minutes into the set, it is time for Lynn to address the shadowy figures gazing up at her, clutching glasses of wine and beer in their hands. Although Lynn is a smoker, she is grateful for the city policy that means she now plays in a venue that smells more sweetly than her uptown apartment.

She thanks the audience for their appreciation, reminds them that they are listening to the Lynn Wood Trio, and tells them what songs she's just played. Although too much chat is frowned on at a jazz gig, she feels obliged to give a little background to her next number.

"My daughter lives in L.A. now," she says hesitantly. "She's an optometrist, I

think. Some kind of eye specialist. But when I wrote this song, she was just a little girl. And I still think of her as one whenever we perform it. Here it is: *Kirsten!*”

Indeed, it is memories of her dearest and only fruit of her womb that fill her thoughts as she plays her own pianistic tribute to the restraint and beauty of Bill Evans who was such a great influence to Lynn in those early days in Peckham and, later, North London.

Those were hard days and Lynn knows only too well that a single tune, however sincerely meant, can scarcely begin to recompense for the neglect she'd actually shown her daughter. Those were days when a regular supply of smack and a series of relationships, unsatisfactory and ecstatic in equal measure, were far more important to her than a wailing child whose father had left her when Lynn was still a fifth-form pupil. Even those formative days of premature motherhood were just a momentary stumble in a series of boyfriends, drugs and a passion for music that owed nothing at all to the subtleties and rhythm of Bill Evans or Duke Ellington. However, as the fashion for the disco of Sister Sledge and Chic was supplanted by jazz funk and Lynn's growing interest in the origins of those more intriguing rhythms, music was mostly just the backdrop to her carnal and narcotic indulgences.

When she wrote her song, the nearest any of her compositions has ever approached to commercial success, it was more a guilty tribute to the feelings she felt she ought to have towards her daughter than a reflection of the love she actually expressed. 'The Brat', as she'd privately christened the optometrist-to-be, was an awkward child who resented the series of wholly unsuitable boyfriends shooting up in the squalid bedroom she shared with her mother. Long before she was able to enjoy sex herself, she'd seen enough of it on her mother's bed. And frequently with more

than one partner.

Perhaps that was why Lynn sees so little of the daughter celebrated in the wistful melodies of her most celebrated opus. And why Kirsten dedicates herself to a life as unlike that of her reprobate mother as it is possible to be. When she and her boring accountant husband have children of their own it is unlikely they'll know anything other than the comforts of West Coast Suburbia.

It is Paul's turn for a prolonged solo and he smiles broadly as he acknowledges Lynn's nod. Dave Holland, look out! Lynn leans back on her stool and lets her eyes wander about the audience she hasn't really had the opportunity to study before. It is the usual Wednesday night crowd at the Village Vanguard: mostly men, mostly middle-aged, a couple of disorientated Japanese tourists and a lot of tapping toes.

She knows her daughter isn't seated there in the second row, by a table all to herself. Although Kirsten has supported her mother's career with more selflessness and love than Lynn ever managed towards her daughter, there are too many miles and too many optically challenged patients between them for her to celebrate her mother's good fortune at earning a short residency at the world's most celebrated jazz venue. It is a woman, though, a white one as well and the same one who sat in the same seat the night before. The same woman who approached Lynn as she made her way to the back room that doubles as both changing room and kitchen.

"I really want to say just how much I enjoyed your set," she told Lynn shyly in her educated Brooklyn accent.

"Why thank you!" said a truly flattered Lynn, who is accustomed to praise from men but rarely receives it from women.

“I love all your songs,” continued the woman gushingly, “but especially *Kirsten*. I can’t begin to describe how much it helped me when I was going through a bad patch. I’ve often meant to see you perform, but you don’t play downtown often enough...”

“The tours take me everywhere, but it’s my home town I enjoy playing the most,” Lynn replied. “The world’s a big place, you know.”

“Yes, yes,” said the woman, clinging desperately to her moments of conversation with the English émigré. “I’ve seen the itinerary on your website. You play everywhere. San Francisco, Tokyo, Sao Paolo, Trond...Trond...”

“Trondheim. Norway,” Lynn corrected. “Great country. I love it...”

“And I love you,” said the woman. Then blushing: “I mean I love your music. It means so much to me.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Lynn, who smiled, and eased pass the woman to Paul and Tomasz waiting for her at the back with her long-neglected packet of Marlboros.

It is Tomasz who takes over from Paul with shuffling soft percussion, while Lynn’s hands hover over the keyboard. At last, it seems right and she breaks the tempo with a few tinkly notes mostly drowned out by the applause for her sidemen. Then, appropriately for the time of year, it is the yearning sadness of *Autumn Leaves* that she plays to the delight of the Japanese tourists.

Tomasz and Paul are attractive men, both younger than Lynn, and together they make a coherent trio, communicating with the empathy of all successful improvisers. Each knows intuitively what the others are doing and is happy to give each other the support that has kept the trio going for more than two years now.

However, much as Lynn privately lusts for Paul's lean, muscular body, his arms bare to the shoulder, or the slightly vulnerable, even feminine, Tomasz, she has learnt from earlier mistakes not to mix a professional relationship with sex. In earlier days, in Peckham, later in North London and, then, on the back of one of her more passionate relationships, Stateside, she let the easy rapport she achieved on stage overlap on her bedchamber.

It is undoubtedly true that the skill for improvisation that make her a professional jazz musician are just as well expressed in physical passion, and she has enjoyed sex with the members of her earlier trios, even the quartets and quintets, sometimes together but more often separately. But the more passion, and the more recklessly it is expressed, the briefer the length of time she has managed to hold her ensembles together before jealousy and intrigue threw the whole affair apart, invariably messily and rarely without rancour.

What would it be like to take Paul's cock in her mouth? Or even Tomasz's? Lynn has long ago overcome her fear of unfamiliar white cock, although the first few times were definite disappointments compared to the standards of sexual prowess she had become accustomed to. But even now, she feels more content brushing against black skin. Perhaps not as often as she once did and certainly no longer as often as she'd like, but advancing age hasn't diminished her desire, however much it has affected her ability to prolong her carnal encounters beyond the first hour or so.

It is, in fact, weeks, maybe over a month, since she last enjoyed sex and, like so many of her more recent encounters, it was an unsatisfactory affair that failed to go beyond even the first night. Her last real relationship was well over a year ago, and she was more shocked by its disintegration than she ever thought possible. It is harder

to find and even harder to hold onto a good thing. Once she thought her comparative fame and fortune would bring her an unbroken series of affairs, but the history of her amours has followed a different trajectory to that of her critical and exceedingly modest commercial success.

People might think that the rewards of a career like hers would be a life of constant debauchery, but, just as she reluctantly, but heroically, abandoned a life of drug abuse that threatened to get out of control, so too, and for totally different reasons, has a life of easy sexual abandon deserted her.

After the applause that greets the final notes of *Autumn Leaves*, Lynn thinks the audience is ready for sterner stuff. In the hush between numbers, she plinks a few notes and looks searchingly towards Paul and Tomasz. The Polish drummer is a talented composer himself, and he deserves credit for the next number which he knows is next in the repertoire. Better to give that credit afterwards when the audience has heard it, than before when they might think Lynn is featuring his *Karol's Wake* for reasons of kindness rather than admiration.

She lets him begin on the little brush that strokes the cymbals, while Paul closes his eyes and readies his fingers on the strings of his double bass and Lynn squeezes her hands together on her lap.

Perhaps it is the sorrow of Polish history that guides Tomasz's compositional muse, but it is a sense of regret and lost beauty that inspires Lynn's interpretation of his sweet melody. Her own compositions have also become much less upbeat and more wistful, and fit easily with the mood that develops. Tomasz's notes slide easily into those of Lynn's *Approaching Ennui* and an ambience of sadness and reflection replaces the more straight-ahead rhythms of the first few numbers.

Sometimes Lynn believes she only truly knows herself through her improvisations. She expresses more of herself on the ivory keys than she has ever been able to do in word and deed. Perhaps this is why her daughter loves her, not because of the maternal love she so much failed to provide, but from the truer feelings that guides her through the performances which drain and enervate her, but also bring her to a level of ecstasy that not even heroin ever managed to do.

Tomasz's lightly brushed tympani bring the medley to a close and the applause that greets the pause gives Lynn the space to study her audience again. The woman in the second row is strangely illuminated, perhaps, Lynn fancies, by the light shining from Paul's beatific grin. Although she is applauding as vigorously as anyone else, Lynn is sure she can see tears smeared over her face.

Lynn does not think of herself as a woman especially inclined to Sapphic pleasures, although there have been occasions when she has succumbed to them when they are available. She senses that this woman is besotted by her, and there is little doubt in her mind that there would be much effort required in persuading her to extend her adoration of Lynn's music to her body. But what does Lynn think of her female admirer?

Clearly, she is not a woman in her earliest bloom, but she is still younger than Lynn. She remembers from their brief encounter that she is a woman who carries her years lightly and she is sure that there is beauty beneath her sweater and jeans that is well worth the adventure. Although she has often had sex with her admirers, not once has that been with a woman. And would this even be wise?

Lynn doesn't know, but the thought of an amorous liaison excites her in a way she didn't expect.

“The first song in the medley was written by Tomasz,” Lynn announced, generously gratified, as was the Pole, by the audience’s thunderous appreciation. “*Karol’s Wake*. It’s about the late Pope, I think. The second two are new songs of mine, as yet untitled.”

Then, as is traditional at this stage in the gig, Lynn introduces her sidemen by name. As always it is Paul who gets the loudest yelps of appreciation. Lynn knows that it isn’t just his playing that earns the audience’s adoration but that natural love for his trade that shines from his eyes and his remarkably healthy teeth. If her daughter had been a dentist rather than an eye specialist, who knows how much admiration she would express for her sideman, whose only hours away from constant practise on the tool of his trade are spent in the uptown gym where he exercises his generously toned biceps.

Lynn has learnt from her years of performing to pace her sets without the benefit of a watch, and now is the time to up the tempo and bring the set towards its climax. There is no need to announce the Brian Wilson song she has made her own, although she is wise enough not to emulate the vocals. But even as her piano sings over Tomasz’s joyful percussion, she mouths to herself: “Wouldn’t it be nice...”

How nice would it be, Lynn wonders, to get married, to have children and live a Suburban life? One just like her daughter’s? A life of domestic settled bliss she fears it is already too late to know herself.

On the other hand, would she have willingly exchanged all the sex and associated excitement for well-tended lawns and the local church? How many housewives have enjoyed as much cock as she has? She has heard about suburban orgies, but she can’t imagine that the huge drives and sidewalks are really home to

more depravity than what she has already enjoyed.

As she guides the trio towards her next number, *Nardis*, a Miles Davis opus naturally, that allows her to show off the skills earned from hours of practise, the erotic images that fill her mind feature rather less cock and lithe male muscle than a softly feminine intimacy. When was the last time she tasted the thick lips of another woman's vagina? Not for a long time, but her memories are vivid and so too is her as yet unrealised resolution to taste more. That Brooklyn woman promises so much and not only was there desire hidden in her eyes, but a strange enthusiasm that Lynn is sure would make a night with her a night to remember.

And maybe not just the one night.

And wouldn't a little reliable intimacy be welcome at this time in her life?

Music melds mind and body together in a most strange way. And tonight the erotic frisson of Lynn's speculation is taking her improvisations in a new direction. Her fingers caress the keyboard as she would make love to a naked body. The rhythm she maintains in her left hand expresses the carnality of desire, whilst her right hand guides a melody that hints at those deeper emotions that are most keenly felt in the throes of sexual ecstasy.

And then Tomasz takes over the rhythm, pushed forward by the strum of Paul's double bass. The three of them bring their improvisations together in one of those moments of mutual communication that are as ecstatic as any other kind. Paul's grin threatens to split his face in two and Tomasz is as rhapsodic as he can ever be. And Lynn knows, although she has only ever seen it in photographs, that her own face is a broad, almost child-like, expression of rapture.

One more number and the set will be over. Or not quite. The audience, and in

particular the Brooklyn woman of Lynn's fantasies, won't let the trio off the stage.

This is the last set of the night and there is no excuse that the audience will accept.

"Well, thank you! *Thank you!*" says Lynn, who is genuinely flattered by the applause. She smiles at the woman in the second row whom she senses must know that the added impetus that made tonight's set gel so well came from her. "And this *must* be the last one on our set. It's a number that I, for one, will always associate with the Village Vanguard. The Bill Evans classic: *Gloria's Step!*"

This unscheduled third encore is for Paul's benefit. It's a number perfectly attuned to his virtuosity and he takes up the challenge with relish and much to the delight of his adoring fans. Tomasz's face beams with a smile almost as broad as Paul's and Lynn can feel the ache in her own cheeks as the musicians coalesce in one last improvisation.

The audience know that three encores are enough and aided by the lights being raised by the management, they get up to leave at the same time as the Lynn Wood Trio gathers their water bottles together to leave the stage. The woman in the second row still sits there as the rest of the audience head off to the door and the steps leading up to the Manhattan streets.

She stands up and pulls a long leather overcoat over her shoulders. She glances up half-expectantly towards Lynn and is clearly surprised to see the pianist approach her.

"So what did you think of the gig?"

The woman chokes slightly to be addressed so directly, but she recovers her composure even though her white freckled skin is unable to hide the colouring that fills her cheeks.

“It was probably the best concert I’ve ever heard!” she says. Sensing more is needed, she adds: “I particularly enjoyed those melodic tunes you played in the middle. How can music be *so* beautiful?”

“Indeed!” says a gratified Lynn. “I’m glad you enjoyed our set. So, what’s your name?”

“Tina,” she says. “Tina,” she repeats. “I’m called Tina.”

“Tina,” muses Lynn. A nice short name, but this Tina is very unlike the soul chanteuse who is her namesake. “You’re a Brooklyn girl aren’t you? Are you going back home by subway?”

Tina nods and Lynn studies her face. She is sure her instincts are right. This is a woman whose passion for Lynn could easily become physical. She just needs the opportunity. As the pause between them lengthens, Lynn sees excitement and nervousness battle to set her face in repose.

“I really truly enjoy your music,” Tina gushes at last. “For a long time, *Kirsten* was the only tune of yours I really appreciated, but now I’m addicted to every song you play or write. And this show was much, much more enjoyable than I’d ever thought possible.”

It would be too soft to admit to Tina how much Lynn’s fantasies of conjugal passion added to the success of the set, but there is no way that the pianist can allow the woman to disappear into the streets alone.

“Stay a moment, Tina, and I’ll accompany you to the subway. I’ve just got to say goodbye to the boys.”

“Accompany me to the subway?” Tina gasps. Had she ever imagined that the famous Lynn Wood might ever make that suggestion?

“There’s so much we can talk about, I’m sure.”

“There is?”

Lynn takes Tina by the shoulders, feeling her slender frame through the patent leather. She recognises too well the desire that burns in the Brooklyn woman’s eyes.

She kisses Tina briefly and tenderly on the lips, thick lips against thin: Tina’s opening ever so little but managing to restrain her eager tongue.

As their lips separate and Lynn studies her admirer from arms’ length, she feels a fire burning between her thighs she knows she must satisfy. And she knows that Tina is the one to do it. Those slender hands with the tapering fingers she grasps in hers. The dimples in cheeks on an otherwise gaunt face. The long neck that curves towards the open lapels of her leather overcoat.

“And I’m sure,” says Lynn, “that talking needn’t be all we do together this night!”