A Story Sung

Scenes from the life of a Pittsburgh Jazz Musician

By

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April 2003

Introduction

I was four years old when my parents owned an upscale restaurant in Sharpsburg, called the Crowe's Nest. It was a large restaurant that had live entertainment on Friday and Saturday nights. I spent a lot of my childhood there and the place was not only a second home to my family, but was also a place for budding relationships. My mother met her husband of fifteen years while he was remodeling the place and my grandmother, Betsy, (and the rest of my family) first met Jerry Betters.

The two different love affairs were somewhat scandalous -- my mother was still married to my father and my grandmother was still technically married to my grandfather. But for some reason, Betsy and Jerry's affair was a shame to my family. Perhaps it was because Jerry had an unusual career- a jazz singer with an amazing voice and wonderful reputation in Pittsburgh, but, still, a jazz singer. Maybe it was because he worked for my parents every weekend, was paid a large amount of money and gained a lot of his popularity with the female audience. But, perhaps, it was because he is black and we are white.

On the surface, my family is open-minded. They do not judge people because of their color; they are not prejudiced. But when my grandmother fell in love with

Jerry, then there was a problem. I will never know exactly why approval and blessing was lacking-- I am only left to guess.

I do not remember the affair taking place -- I was too young to notice. But I do remember Jerry. I remember him buying me dolls from the drug store, running out into the pouring rain just to get one for me. I remember him taking me to the zoo, and, most of all, I remember standing up on stage, singing with him. I remember him bringing me up on stage, on a Friday night, and having me help him with the chorus of a song. The lounge had a stage where he performed and the entire wall behind it was mirrored and I loved to watch myself and Jerry through the mirrors. The lounge chairs were large and covered with red leather cushions and when I was tired I would put two chairs together (facing each other) and make a little bed for myself. When I was thirsty, I would walk through the smoky lounge to the bar on the opposite side of the room where I would pour myself a Coke- the walk then seemed to be miles but today I realize it was only about forty feet. Black and white tile covered the floor and I would try to only step on the white ones. Chicken fingers were my choice of dinner while I watched Jerry's shows. I remember it well; it was part of my life for the first few years.

Soon the restaurant was gone, bankrupt. My parents moved on in their life and I saw my grandmother less frequently. I hardly saw Jerry, but I never forgot him. When I was a sophomore in college, I was walking in a building and suddenly I smelled a familiar mix of cologne, mints, and something else. I turned around and a black man had just passed me, wearing the same kind of hat that Jerry used to.

"Jerry!" I called out. The man turned around, and I immediately realized it wasn't Jerry. I blushed, apologized, and tried to forget about the incident. I saw Jerry about a year and a half later -- he was visiting my grandmother. He had throat cancer and hardly recognized me. Mentally, he was all there, but he had recently had to stop singing, his brother had died, and his daughters were getting old and very independent. But I brought up my senior honors thesis to him, thinking that his input would be helpful. He was, after all, one of the most prominent drummers and singers in Pittsburgh for over forty-five years. He made a name all over the country and knew Frank Sinatra well enough to have been able to call him up for a favor, and Michael Jackson once asked Jerry if he was tired from all the singing. Jerry's name is known from anyone involved in the music business from the fifties to the present and most have witnessed him playing. Despite his old age and raspy voice, he is still being asked to play his music at clubs around the city. And anyone who knows him would say that he could have been as big as Nat Cole or Sammy Davis Jr. if he [HAD] wanted to. But after a short time in New York City, Jerry realized that his home was in Pittsburgh and stayed there for the majority of his career.

I was doing a large feature journalism piece on the bars of Pittsburgh. Thinking of Jerry's career of singing in bars and clubs, I thought he would have some advice for me. Three hours later, I had learned a large chunk of Jerry's history and the history of the Pittsburgh jazz scene. I took the information back and tried to apply it to my thesis.

You're in the Ghetto Now

A month later, I was tired of the bar theme and found myself thinking back to those hours that passed like minutes when Jerry was telling me his stories. I called Jerry and told him I'd like to talk to him more. I sat with him and learned how he, as a black man, was able to dip into so many worlds -- black and white, rich and poor, glamorous and plain. He has stories that are fascinating and simple. He knows about the world, saw the civil rights movement from a unique standpoint and fought his own personal battles. I listened to him for hours, and listened to his friends and those whom he talked about. I tried to give his story justice on paper, knowing I would never be able to tell it like he did.

When I first started to meet with him, I met him at my parents' house in Greensburg. We would meet during the weekdays, so he could visit with my grandmother, but my parents wouldn't be home (and usually didn't even know that we had met there during that day). Not that they would outright disapprove of him meeting us there, but there was always a silent tension in the room when the black musician was with my mother. She was polite, but in a stiff way. So we met somewhat secretly. But after a while, as Jerry's health grew poorer, the drive became too much so we arranged for me to meet him at his apartment in the city. I printed out directions and tried to steer my directionally-challenged self through Shadyside and East Liberty to the unknown territory of Garfield. When I turned onto Fern

Street, where Jerry's high-rise sat, I marveled at this mysterious part of Pittsburgh that I never even knew existed. I drove past people sitting on their porches talking to their neighbors, men gathered around a car apparently inspecting something under the hood, a little girl riding a tricycle, her mother calling after her. And all of these people were black. I was the only white person in sight and I felt their stares as I drove through. Now, I'm not a racist, but I have never been the minority before. And all I could say to myself as I parked was, "Pittsburgh has projects?" I got out of my car, admittedly being extra-cautious to lock my doors as I do when I'm in South Oakland or on Carson Street, and started to walk toward the apartment building.

Halfway there, I noticed a skeleton of a black man walking out to greet me. I walked up to Jerry and awkwardly kissed him on his cheek, feeling even more awkward because we had never been awkward before. I noticed the people looking at us strangely and, I wondered what their thoughts were. What was that white girl doing here, kissing that old black man, handing him her purse? He looked at my face, I tried to hide my surprise at my surroundings and he chucked. "You're in the ghetto now," he said as he guided me toward the front door. I realized then where the awkwardness was coming from -- we had switched places. Usually Jerry was in my surroundings and I had always naively assumed that his surroundings were the same as mine. But now, I saw that his world was different. His surroundings were black and mine were white.

I had to sign in and leave my driver's license at the door. Jerry talked to an old woman who wouldn't even look at me. The girls at the front "desk" (which was

surrounded by bullet-proof glass) gave me a hard time about how many different types of identification I had to give them. Jerry decided to step in and told them that we were going to his apartment for just a while. We went to the elevator. When we got in, he pressed number four and we started to jaggedly ride up. The doors wouldn't close all the way, so I could see the spray-painted floor numbers as we went up. When we got out, we were back outside, like at a hotel. Everything was concrete and had a certain smell, a mix of elderly, cigarette smoke, grease, and something rancid.

When we entered his apartment again I was hit. I had never seen any of Jerry's personal possessions. He had knickknacks and photographs. His furniture was an eclectic mix of what he had collected over the years. For a kitchen table, he had white lawn furniture with pink seashell pillows on them. The TV blared the news. I didn't know where or how to sit. But after a few moments sitting on the edge of a tan frayed couch, I realized that I just had to do what I usually did – listen. Sometimes he would babble, other times he would ask me what I wanted to hear. But this time, his stories, the ones about race, actually meant something. I had thought before, while we were sitting in the comfort of my mother's kitchen smoking Marlboros and drinking coffee, that his stories meant something. But it took sitting in that apartment building, being in the ghetto, to realize what it actually meant – what Jerry's life and triumphs and decisions meant for his time, his age, and his race. Most wouldn't have done what he did. Most didn't do what he did. Most didn't understand why he did what he did. But suddenly I could understand. I understand

the balance between black and white worlds that he lived every day since he got on the bus from Connellsville, PA, to New York City.

Stepping off the Bus

"You know I grew up in Connellsville, right?" begins Jerry. He chuckles. "There weren't many blacks there, but there wasn't that much racism either. Connellsville is a town that seems like it's in the middle of nowhere, its hard to imagine that its only about twenty-five miles outside of Pittsburgh."

Jerry sits back and contemplates, seeming to be deciding exactly what to say next. This story could go several ways it seems. Though it seems that way for all of his stories. "I was a drummer there. In Connellsville. My whole family played music, but I was always told that I was the best. I could outplay the drums of everyone in that town and everyone told me that I should go to New York City. I wanted to be a musician. Everyone knew that, it was just a matter of time, you know. So my last year of high school, I dropped out, got a bus ticket and went to New York City to be a musician. It was about 1945 then." He chuckles again as he is brought back to his first steps into the world of jazz.

Jerry might have been young, but he had the confidence of an old man. He admired his own hands more than his fans back home admired his drumming hands. He was the best, he had always been told. And he believed it.

The bus ride was long and a bit grueling, considering his excitement to enter the musical world. Jerry sat in the back of the bus, applying to the standards of the time and carried his small piece of luggage on his lap. His father had given him the

name of a drummer in the city and he held the address in his right hand the entire trip. When the bus stopped at the outskirts of Harlem, Jerry could hardly contain himself from pushing others over to get off in time. He grabbed his case with his left hand, held his sticks and address in the right hand, and looked down the busy city street.

"Harlem was bustling then, you know? Just like the Hill District was in Pittsburgh?" Jerry interrupts himself, perhaps comparing these now run-down areas out loud.

Jerry watched down the street and started walking in the opposite direction of the bus, not really knowing which way was right. He didn't walk more than fifty feet before he stopped. Jerry looked to his left and then to his right. He looked at the market a few doors down and then looked at the bank right after it. He was scared. Everyone was black. He had never seen black people run businesses for black customers.

"Now, I knew I was black," he says. "And I had obviously seen black people before. But I never knew that there could be so many in such a condensed area. For some reason, I though they were all spread out. I never knew that all black communities existed. And damn it, I'll admit it now, for the first few days of seeing so many black people and not one white person, I was scared!"

On the Other Side of the Chicken Wire

Jerry had gotten his band together in New York City, still drumming, setting a reputation for himself as a left-handed drummer. He got an invitation to tour the country with boxer Joe Louis for one month. Obviously, he jumped at it. They all boarded the bus, there were five acts [that were] traveling together. Jerry's band at the time consisted of three men, one being white, and the only white man on the bus. Jerry had never been to the South and that was their first destination, Birmingham, Alabama.

"The day before we left, we were supposed to all go meet together. All of the bands, but the other guys in my band decided to skip it. They wanted all of us kids who have never been to the South to go to the meeting, especially. But we didn't think twice, we wanted to do more fun things. We went out instead, went to the clubs. We were young, you know," he says, foreshadowing the mistake he made.

When they arrived in Birmingham, the musicians started to descend from [off of] the bus. Jerry's band happened to be the first ones off and they started to follow Joe Louis and his entourage (who had been in a limo) into the stage door. Jerry looked around and there were fans there clapping that the show was in town. He knew they weren't clapping for him in particular, but he felt like a star. They were black and white and they stood along the

pathway for them to walk into the theatre. The sun beat down on them and Jerry couldn't adjust to the southern humidity. Sweat poured off his brow and he dug for a handkerchief in his back pocket.

Suddenly, a police officer holding a billy club stepped in front of them. "Where do you niggers think you are going?" he asked. Jerry looked up, not quite realizing the cop was talking to them. He had never been called a nigger by a police officer before.

"We're one of the bands," he answered, not knowing that he should be scared. He was only filled with confusion. After all, there were fans cheering for him. Why would there be a problem?

"He," the cop said, pointing to Jerry's white band mate, "can go through that door."

Jerry looked confused. His other band member, who was black, spoke up, "But, officer, we're supposed to play," he said, not sounding quite sure of himself.

"You niggers go through the back door," he said, with a shove toward the back of the building.

Though he was shaken up, Jerry was determined to make the most of the concert. Hours later they practiced during their practice time, not talking about the incident at the door that had happened just hours before. When the concert started they waited for their number to be called, and then went

towards the stage when they were next. The stagehand took one look at the band and said, "This won't work."

Jerry was perplexed. What could be going wrong now?

"You," the stagehand pointed at the white musician, "have to stay on the white side. You can't play on the nigger side."

"What do you mean, the white side?" he asked.

"You have to play on the other side of the chicken wire," he said impatiently. "You're up, go on." They walked out and saw that the theatre had been transformed. The seating areas were divided by a chicken wire fence running up the center aisle cutting the theatre in half. The fence was about seven foot tall, and on stage right, everyone was white. On stage left, everyone was black. So the white band member went to one side of the stage and the other two stayed on the left.

"Can you believe that?" Jerry exclaims. "How is it possible to play a concert when half of your band is across the stage from you? And the stage was big." Jerry sat contemplating the size of his spacious apartment. "At least the size of the length of my place.

Anyway," he continued. "If we had gotten paid after that show, I would have left. Gotten a bus ticket and went straight back to New York. But we were getting paid at the end of the tour. If it weren't for the rest of my band, I would have probably left without pay. But I stayed. And I hated it. And I've never been back to the South. To this day, I can't stand to hear

Southern accents. I couldn't stand it down there. It was a different culture. The yessih's and nosih's. I didn't understand black people down there. But it was a different culture. The North wasn't perfect yet. There were racist people everywhere, but it wasn't embedded into society."

"After a while I stopped getting angry at it and started to have fun with it. When we played at a hotel, we would stop to get something to eat, promising to take it out. We couldn't sit in any of the restaurants, you know. So we would order a drink while we were waiting. Drink it and then the bartender would break the glass. Make a point of it, thinking it would bother us. So we would wait for him to drop that glass on the floor behind the bar and chuckle and order another drink so we could laugh at him breaking another glass. And then when we got our food – if we were eating at the bar, which at some places we were allowed to do – us blacks would get paperware and then plastic silverware. But the white guy would get nice places and silverware. We would laugh our heads off. But deep down, it bothered us."

"It definitely was a learning experience, but I never wanted to do it again. I know I sound very bitter, but I know not all the people were bad. It was the police mostly. Some of the concerts were black concerts and some were white. When it was a black concert, whites were only allowed on the balcony. When it was a white concert, blacks were only allowed on the balcony. Cops were always there. Sometimes, when the crowd would really get into the music, the people on the balcony – guys mostly, black or white

depending on which night it was – would jump down to the dance floor and pick up a girl to dance with. And they would really be getting down, mixing fine with each other, but then the cops would come with their billy clubs and start beating people. For no reason. It was such a shame to watch. How was I supposed to play my best there? I don't blame the people, but I have never gone back. I can't help it. It's human association."

The Band's Table

"It wasn't really common for there to be a black band with a white member back then. Especially with me as the black lead singer. Most club owners didn't like that," Jerry says. "I guess that was most apparent with the band's table."

A few years after Jerry started performing, in the mid to late fifties the clubs actually started let them stay on for the rest of the night, giving them a band's table. The club was completely white, so Jerry and any black members of the band were the only black people there. Most of the time Jerry had one white member in his trio at first and though this wasn't on purpose, but it became intentional after awhile after Jerry realized the benefits of having a white man in the band. Jerry particularly remembers one night well at the band's table.

Jerry was performing at one of his least favorite clubs, mostly because of the owner, Lenny Litman. The pay was below the standards for the 1950's and blacks were treated terribly – regardless of their talent. But the Club, called the Copa on Liberty Avenue, was one of the most popular in Pittsburgh so it gave Jerry a lot of exposure and was one of the best gigs possible in the city. Jerry knocked on the back stage door and was refused by the white bartender who opened it. "Whites only," the bartender said gruffly and slammed the door in his face. If it wasn't for rent and the need to eat, Jerry

would have turned around, but he knew that this performance would give him a lot of exposure. He knocked again and quickly explained he was in the band.

He and his members started setting up and after awhile Lenny came in. He surveyed all of the preparations and then came up to the band. "Now boys," Jerry remembers Lenny saying. "Nothing with too much jazz…too backwatery…" He was actually trying a bit to not offend Jerry. "You'll go on at seven. Play, take a fifteen minute break, then play more. During your break and then after your performance, you are to directly go to the band's table and sit. Don't go to the bathroom, don't order a drink, don't mingle. Your place is at the table." Lenny seemed to think for a couple moments about what he was going to say next.

"Richie, right?" Lenny said to the white bassist. "You know you can join the audience afterwards." He turned around and walked away.

Though Jerry was used to this sort of thing, he was perturbed. After their first set, he had Richie get him a drink of water from the bar. When people came up to the table, Jerry had them sit down in Richie's seat, watching the glares come from Lenny. Jerry accepted drinks from women though he didn't finish any of them. They played the last set and then sat back down at the table, staying till close. Jerry let women sit down at his table with him. He laughed and mingled, though still keeping a close distance to his "black" table.

Lenny cancelled Jerry's show for the next week, but invited him back a week after that.

The Mickey Mouse Beat

At first, during the mid to late fifties, it was easier just to work at black clubs like the Crawford Grill on the Hill. It was easier to get the actual gigs – a black band made more sense for a black club than a white club. Then Jerry got his first real gig at a white club and realized how much better it was. "A white audience was easier to please, you know. It was almost that they would think that just because you were black, you played good music and were pleased with just about everything. But black folks – man, you really had to get down for them," Jerry laughed, in memory. "Black folks really liked to dance. And I hate to say it, but they really appreciated a good rhythm more than white folks did back then. Black folks wanted music to dance to. Most white folks wanted music to listen to."

Jerry skirted this line – playing for both black and white clubs until he completely went white. There was more money, a shorter time of play, and it was just easier. Then Jerry found the simplicity of playing in white country clubs.

Jerry had been warned to not touch the white country club gigs. Black bands had tried it before, but had nothing good to say about it. "They won't even let us play music," he was told. "They make us play a businessman's trot."

He played his first country club gig, which he admitted at the time was easy. The job was at the Churchill Country Club and Jerry's job was to play dinner music. The uniform was a white tux and there was no singing. Jerry played the drums and had Richie, the bassist, accompany him. The band was pushed off to the corner while the men in jackets and women wearing pearls sat and ate dinner while socializing with their country club friends. He was a picture on the wall that made sounds- background music that wasn't really to be listened to. Like most black musicians, Jerry was itching to get out and play some real music. But the money was good at the country club, and when the owner asked him to come back (probably because he liked that there was a white musician in the band) Jerry agreed.

Occasionally, Jerry would go back to black clubs, partly because he really wanted to play for people who appreciated him for his music, partly to appease the black musicians who were criticizing Jerry's audience, which was becoming whiter and whiter. But every once in awhile, he would call up the owner of the Crawford Grill and see if there was room in the next couple of weeks. Jerry would practice until the gig and then hope all day that he would be able to get the audience move like they anticipated. "There was a lot of anticipation on their behalf," he says. "They wanted to let go of their stresses and had no inhibitions when the music hit them right. And that was really satisfying as a musician."

The band would play and the people would dance all night. The smoke filled the air, but the smell of sweat overcame it. People drank some, mostly whisky and beer, but most weren't there to get drunk. They were there to dance, to feel the beat, to let Jerry and the others take them away. It was a hard job, and, somewhat selfishly, Jerry slowly went away from it. "It was so satisfying to make those people get down, but I had easier jobs that paid better lined up. Can you blame me?" he explains.

He continued going back and forth for a few years. About every other Saturday, Jerry took a break from his club playing and stood in the county club playing simple music that he liked to dub "The Mickey Mouse Beat." When his black musician friends made fun of him for it, he was defensive. It wasn't him, but he could do it and it paid better than the clubs did on The Hill. He encountered the retort that if Jerry's kin would follow suit, then jazz would die.

Free Angela Davis

The Pittsburgh Musician's Union was one of the last city musician unions to be desegregated. In 1963 John Hughes, a black union leader, took a major part in starting talks between the two sides (black and white) to step further in the civil rights movement. Jerry was one of the best-known [most well-known] musicians in Pittsburgh at the time, but was also one of the most hated among both black and white musicians. Jerry was ambivalent about [of the] unionization, though was willing to help when possible. He had been working for years on his own and had only used the union because it would have been politically wrong not to.

"You know, I never thought of people as black or white except when it was shoved in my face. Of course I realized that whites had it easier than blacks. Of course I saw the problems. But I was an individualist as people would call it now. I worried about my own music. About my own band. And about feeding myself and my family. Don't get me wrong, I was willing to help my race as much as possible. But I wasn't willing to let my race rule my life."

During the talks with with black musicians about the integration, the black union leaders focused on the young musicians to shape the future as

much as possible. Older musicians were set in their ways. They didn't oppose the unionization, but they weren't willing to put much work in toward it.

John Hughes asked Jerry to talk to a group of young musicians and set up a time and place. Jerry wasn't very excited, but was willing.

The night before the talk, Jerry stayed up all night. He played a gig and then went home to figure out what to say. He didn't have a problem talking to a group of people – he was nervous talking to a group of black people. The next morning, lacking sleep, he made his way to the hall where the young people were waiting. Jerry wanted to talk about future. How he had seen his future at their age and how he saw it now. Jerry wanted to ignore his career, and his white performances.

When he stood up in front of the room, he plastered a smile on his face, downsizing his butterflies. He greeted the men who seemed to be eager but uninterested.

"Hi, I'm Jerry Betters. John Hughes wanted me to give a little speech, though I don't pretend to be a good speech maker. I'm not even sure why he asked me, but I know ya'll have questions about this whole thing that affects your futures more than ours. So-"

Someone raised their hand in the back. "Yes, do you have a question?" Jerry remembers relaxing because of a seeming interest.

"We all know who you are. I just don't understand how you can talk to us about our race when you won't even associate with it," the young man said.

"He's white," another piped in.

About three of them got up and silently walked out, leaving Jerry standing in front, still filled with anticipation. Simultaneously, they all started to whisper and seconds later, all left in a loud clatter. Jerry could hear words like traitor mouthed in the walkout. The room emptied and Jerry had hardly got past his own name.

Today Jerry is now able to look back on the experience with humor, as he does with everything now. He thinks about the moment and it was filled with both anxiety and frustration. "I'm not sure if they all planned it in the beginning or if they were all just following that first person. But, it was ridiculous in my eyes. They wanted to desegregate. They wanted to let go and try to minimize the differences between black and white musicians. But they wouldn't listen to me purely for the fact that I played for white audiences. Which, for me, symbolized the entire problem of the civil rights movement. Blacks wanted rights, but weren't willing to assimilate with whites themselves."

Uncle Tom

"I didn't dislike black people. You can see, I live with black people, I've dated black women and I have black friends. But I just don't see why there needs to be such a distinction between races. Now, there were black people who hated black people. And it completely backlashed on them, at the time and in the future," Jerry explains.

Jerry remembers the day he met Sammy Davis Jr. distinctly in the late sixties. He obviously admired him greatly as a musician, but he had heard the rumors about him. Sammy was a star back then but wasn't unreachable. And rumors spread quickly throughout the musician world. Sammy was quickly dubbed Uncle Tom for his "lack of respect" toward black people and musicians. He was rumored to have called black audiences unbearable and was only going to play for white fans. Physically, Sammy was might have been physically black, but many still said he was trying to "pass" for white- a term dubbed for mulattoes who were so light skinned that they pretended that they were white.

Sammy was Pittsburgh and was going to play the next night at Heinz Hall. Jerry was playing a gig at a white club and heard the Sammy was in the audience. Nervously, Jerry finished his set and went into the club –being allowed to mingle by that time. He saw Sammy, the only other black person

in the club. Jerry nonchalantly waves and tries to make his way over to greet the musician, but Sammy turns away and leaves.

The next night, Sammy was playing for a large audience at Heinz Hall. Billy Eckstine invited Jerry to go backstage and before the show, Billy excitedly brought Jerry to Sammy to introduce the two.

"Sammy, this is my hometown boy, Jerry Betters," Billy said, and Jerry held out his hand.

Sammy mutters a short "hello" and walks away.

"What the hell was that?" Billy exclaims.

"Billy, don't worry about it. He's probably just preparing for his show." Jerry tries to pass the whole situation off lightly.

"No, he'll make this right," Eckstine said. They wait for Sammy to come off and when he did, with sweat pouring off of his face from the long performance, Billy tries to introduce them again. Once again, Sammy gave a short hello and started to walk away.

Billy called out to Sammy and he turned around. "I'll fix him," Billy muttered to Jerry. "Hey Sammy!" he said. "How'd that second operation go?"

"What operation?" the quiet Sammy seemed confused.

"The one where they tried to get your nose out of Frank's ass!" Billy shouted, getting the attention of everyone in hearing distance. Sammy turned

and walked out, but showed how he really felt. He cared nothing for his black audience, only his white audience.

Jerry chuckled at his next thought. "After the years went on, the joke became that Sammy was trying to pass for black now. With the seventies and eighties and the succession of black musicians like Michael Jackson and Diana Ross the civil rights in the musician world skyrocketed. There became such a lack of difference – my chicken wire division past seemed such a distant memory. The change in the world and personally was so long yet so sudden at the same time."

Becoming Part of the Family

"I was lucky to be able to experience the change for blacks in one place, the place where I met your grandmother. I worked there occasionally through the seventies and then full-time in the eighties. My business went from not being welcome in certain clubs because of color to being welcome in any club or restaurant as a patron. I witnessed the entire civil rights movement in the music world first hand," Jerry tells me.

The change was somewhat gradual, but was quick enough that Jerry could see it happening. When he first started to perform at the Crow's Nest, it was owned by an extremely racist white family. The band wasn't invited to the Christmas party and wasn't welcome to be in the restaurant unless they were performing. The bartenders did not talk to them and the lounge waitresses did not acknowledge the band, though their jobs were dependent on the band. It was at the Crow's Nest when Jerry started to play regularly with his brother Harold Betters, who was then a nationally known trombone player. They had played together, but had musical and personal differences. So it was at the Crow's Nest where the band consisted of Jerry, Harold, and Richie (a white musician Jerry had past experience playing with) and an immense change took place in the world and in Jerry's life of playing music for

a white club. During this time (from about 1975 to 1986) [where] Jerry's career and popularity hit its highest.

"But I started to see it change," Jerry says. "If I look at all of the Christmas parties, I can see the gradual change though the years and then when the new owners came in we really became all part of a family."

It started with the bartenders and cocktail waitresses, who became civil and then, even friendly. The band started to be able to sit and walk where they pleased, though they weren't really invited into conversations.

When the new owners came in, the band was a part of the Christmas party. They were allowed to eat dinner at the restaurant. "People started talking to us like we were human," Jerry laughs.

"Let me tell you about two incidents that will show you how different it became. The women were all over me, they still are," he chuckles.

In the beginning of working at the restaurant, about 1976, Jerry had a rough encounter with a woman. He sang to the crowd, trying to please every person as he always did- looking everyone in the eye, playing all requests. After he was done with the set, he walked through the lounge filled with smoke and laughing people. Every round table was piled with empty drink glasses and every red cushioned seat was filled with a customer. Jerry made his way to the bar and asked the bartender for a glass of water. He always stayed a bit after his show to thank the audience member who came to talk to

him. He stood next to an empty bar seat having a cigarette and drinking his glass of water when a woman from the lounge came up to him.

"Let me buy you a drink," the woman slurred.

Politely Jerry tried to refuse. "Thank you m'am, but I don't drink much. Did you enjoy the show?"

"No, you don't have to refuse. I'm going to buy you a drink, what's your choice?"

"I'm very sorry, but I'm fine with my water." Jerry was starting to feel nervous and looked around for the owner or Harold to help. No one was in sight and no one around him was paying attention.

The woman grabs him by the shoulders tightly and said, "I'm buying you a drink and I'll just pick it myself." Jerry took her hands and tried to get them off of him. Immediately, the bartender jumps over the bar and two other customers were on him. The words 'attack' and 'nigger' ran through Jerry's ears as they grabbed him away and drug him into the back room. He was almost fired for attacking a customer, but the owner reluctantly let him stay because of the large crowds he drew for his shows.

A few years later, about 1981, Jerry finished yet another set at the Crow's Nest. The same bartender got him a glass of a water and Jerry sat down at an empty bar stool and had his cigarette. After a few moments, a woman came up to Jerry, not quite as drunk as the earlier one, and asked him

if he would like a drink. Once again, Jerry refused- only drinking on special occasions.

After a few times insisting, the woman gave up and gave Jerry a kiss on the cheek and gave him her number. She walked away and the bartender leaned over to him. "Why don't you take that one home with ya, Jerry?" he laughed.

Jerry contemplates the two stories. "That might be insignificant to some, but that moment marked something in my life. It was the same barstool (standing next to it in the seventies, but being able to sit on it in the eighties) and the same guy who hated me because of my color, but then treating me like his friend. It took a while, but I was finally there. And it seemed like the world was finally there too."

"Yeah there was a change, it was a long time coming, but it came and when it happened, it happened quickly."

* * *

It was at this restaurant where Jerry met my grandmother and where I debuted in my short-lived singing career at the age of three. My grandmother never seemed to notice his color, and though my family was not very ecstatic about the relationship, they never pushed him away because he was black. They began to live different lives and they both got older and, for the most

part, moved on. But they never lost contact and are still with each other in some ways. For me, this relationship shows Jerry's triumphs and beliefs perfectly. He didn't care what people said. Jerry never let his pride for his race get in the way of his pride for himself and his dreams. He stood for what he believed in- whether it was playing at white clubs for more money or not helping black musicians simply because of their color. He did what he wanted to do in life and didn't care if He didn't understand racism. He still doesn't understand racism. He is simply above it.

I ask Jerry a question that I think has an easy answer, but actually comes with a loaded answer, "Is it better now? Do you think society benefited from your generation's struggles?" To myself, I think, of course. What Jerry and the rest of his generation did was make it possible for me to go to a rap concert freely and for black teens to go see N'Sync play.

"Well, yes and no. If it wasn't for civil rights, there wouldn't be the black hip hop music like there is today. So many performers are black and that's great. And the audience is so mixed and I really believe that the music allows the races to get along better and desegregate even more.

"Don't get me wrong – I don't like the [hip hop] music very much. But it has helped society become one race instead of two.

But one the other hand, I think black music has suffered. I think that the desegregation has made us lose our jazz and blues roots. I see young black people today and they forget where we came from. I didn't help this at all,

according to my black colleagues, I helped this problem along. But I don't know who I am to say which is right – a mixed society, or one where everyone knows and appreciates their roots.

Did I help the next generation? I don't know, but I don't regret anything that I did. I'll admit it, I had a fun ride."

Epilogue

Through hearing all of Jerry's stories and his struggles and views of race through his experiences, I started to contemplate my own views on race. Obviously, I have thought about race in the past, but I have never studied it so closely. In my personal essay workshop, we were called upon to write essays about race. Mine came from and is dedicated to Jerry Betters and his triumphs and ability to overcome his race. He was able to be more advanced than his black and white peers in his racial views. He concentrated on his music and ignored the racism that came from others in the music world.

But I'm not a Racist?!

-Elsie Lampl
February 2003

I used to believe that I was not racist. I went to a predominantly white school, and lived in an overwhelmingly rural white community. I grew up believing that skin color made no difference. I believed that what really counted was on the inside and that I, as a middle class white female, had the same opportunities and had no real differences from my peers of a different color. I realized that there were racists in this world, but I definitely wasn't one of them.

Then I entered one of the most diverse universities in the United States. I had never seen so many minorities in one place and although I experienced a bit of culture shock, I still believed that I was not a racist. I maintained my naïve convictions that we were all the same. International students came from different cultures, but Americans are Americans.

It was not until my senior year that I had a shocking revelation. I am racist. I had two different experiences that led me to this revelation. The first showed that race can cause differences between people with similar backgrounds. The other experience taught me that, no matter how hard I try, I do acknowledge race. It may not be in a suppressing manner but, somewhat unconsciously, I sometimes treat black people differently from people of my own race.

Jara, one of my best friends at Carnegie Mellon, is black. She grew up in the same kind of town that I did; we have similar interests and views on life and the world. We have great conversations and, in almost every way, we can relate to each other. But one day, while having a seemingly insignificant conversation, I realized that there were major differences in our cultures that I may have known about, but I did not acknowledge.

Jara was complaining about how one of our housemates would put chunks of her hair on the shower door. I explained to her that Caucasian hair falls out easily, particularly long hair, and I used to do the same thing that our housemate does: run my hands through my hair, grabbing the loose strands so they do not clog the drain. After my explanation, she turned to me with a look of disbelief:

"You think my black hair doesn't fall out? Girl, my hair is so nappy, every time I wash it I have so much fall out. That's one of the reasons I wash my hair only once a week."

I had also noticed that she wore a shower cap. I knew that she went to her salon once a month to go through the grueling process of getting a relaxer "cause it'll turn all nappy." I knew that black women endured hours of pain to get braids. But until that moment I didn't realize the huge difference between my hair and Jara's hair until this moment.

I found out that her hair wasn't even real; it was a weave. Jara taught me what a weave was: fake hair that is attached to her head by corn rolling a crown on her head and sewing the weave in -- a three- to five-hour process. She told me that black women will almost never ever go to white hairdresser. She has to wrap her hair every night around her head and then wear a do-rag so her hair will stay straight and her weave will last longer. I learned that she goes through immense pain when the hairdresser applies the weave, and that it pulls on her scalp for at least the first week, giving her migraines.

Why? I asked. Why go through all of this? Let your hair grow. Let your natural beauty show. Her natural hair was made of beautiful spiral curls.

She had no straight answer. She said, "Well, partly it's just something to do. A style, just like clothing. But I guess in the back of every woman's black mind, when your hair is straight and healthy, it's more white. And even though most won't outright admit it, whiter is better in most cases. Whiter is more beautiful."

She tried to relate it back to my "white" culture. It's the same as wearing shoes that give me blisters, but I still walk to class in them because they add a few inches to my short stature. I still couldn't get it. Why go through pain to be more "white?" Why not just be proud of who she was? Why think of race so much?

She told me it's a culture. A black salon is something white people can't penetrate. They won't be hired and they aren't customers. I cautiously asked where she could [can] go to get her hair done. When she lived in rural areas, was there a black salon?

"You can start a black salon anywhere and thrive," she said. "It doesn't have to be in the ghetto or the black part of town. Black people are loyal to their own race in this way. They'll support these places."

I started to notice black women's hair. The different styles: the braids and the weaves. I knew that Jara isn't considered by many of the black people on campus to be very black – she isn't well-respected by them. I couldn't understand this. Black is black, I said.

"No," she told me. "I'm too white. I dress white. I talk white. My friends are white. And my hair is white. Black people think I'm too white because I act white, but in their own ways they act white. It's tough – you have to have enough blackness to be accepted with them but you have to be white enough to be accepted"

I noticed the black people I know and how their hair connects to their "blackness." One of my friends has straight silky black hair and hangs out with only white girls. Another friend has long braids and hangs out with black girls. Did their

hair really determine their blackness? Maybe their hair doesn't determine their "blackness," but their "blackness" helps determine their hair.

White people don't have to go through such agony when deciding a hairstyle. They choose their hairstyle according to what they like and what looks good on them. Their hair doesn't affect how white they are, although I suppose there are people who try to imitate other races with style.

For instance, when I was in high school a terrible slang term, "wiggers," defined those white boys who dressed in baggy pants and wore gold chains, imitating black rappers. Is this a culture similar to black hair? Do those white boys actually want to [actually] be black, or are they just imitating each other as part of a fad?

What exactly is the difference between culture and race? With hair, I saw that race can determine culture. Idealistic Americans believe that our culture is truly a "melting pot" as I did, but as the differences become apparent between races, I cringe at the thought of one American culture. I always had a cynical personality, but when it came to race I had no cynicism. I knew race would never be a factor when judging a person. But my idealistic self lost sight of the fact that race is a part of a person and, in some areas, people of different races can't completely relate.

About a month ago, Jara and I were leaving Giant Eagle, pushing a shopping cart full of groceries. At this store, a small gap exists where the curb slants so the carts can be pushed to the parking lot. A beat-up mini-van blocked this grade, so we waited a few minutes for the man behind the driver's seat to realize that he had to move up so we could get through. Finally, Jara impatiently went and tapped on the

window, asking him to pull up a few feet. We walked through and Jara started to laugh at herself and exclaimed how she was so racist.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Because all I thought was that it was a stupid black man," she said nonchalantly. I laughed, but she had made me uncomfortable because of my immediate thoughts. I did not think the man was stupid because he was black, but I had immediately noted that he was black and I was annoyed by his inconsiderateness. The entire ride home, I wondered if I would have taken notice of the man's color if he had been white.

For weeks, I found myself revisiting this situation. Why was it sticking out in my mind? I tried to analyze my reactions to black people and was shocked to observe how I reacted. I had never understood [consciously observed my responses before, but] that I do notice color. In a way, I am more polite with black people. I go out of my way to be nicer, to smile sooner to a black stranger than to a white. Do I pity black people? No, but perhaps, unconsciously, I want to assure to these strangers that I do not dislike them because of their color. I smile at black children more often than at white children. When I see facilities management workers on campus, I am more polite to the black workers than their white co-workers.

Does this mean I'm racist? Perhaps not in the traditional sense, but I looked up the definition of racism on the Internet and I found two different meanings:

*"**Any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race**, colour,*

descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise, on equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, or any other field of public life."

* * *

"Racism is essentially a conscious or unconscious ***belief in the inherent superiority of one race*** *over another\others and thereby the right by that race to use power to dominate."*

I don't believe that I am superior to other races because I am white. The first definition begins with "any distinction." Does my extra cautiousness and politeness mean that I fit into this category of a racist? I treat my black friends and acquaintances the same as my white ones (and my Asian ones for that matter.) But for some reason, I don't see strangers the same way. Am I the only person who treats black strangers this way just because they are black? Is it sympathy? Is it because I am scared that someone will call me a racist?

Why do I treat black strangers differently from white people? My grandmother's boyfriend is black and I never treated him differently. I fight and make fun of Jara as much as I do my white friends. Do I want to assure black strangers that I am not a racist, so I make special efforts to be pleasant? Do I pity them? Do I feel superior?

I try to imagine my actions if a black child and white child were together. I know I would treat them differently. I would be more delicate with the black child.

More encouraging, more courteous. Consciously, I would be treating the children equally. Unconsciously, I would pity the black child because I know that he will probably have a harder life than the white child. He will have to deal with more issues; he will have to fight through society. He will be a minority. People will call him names. So why not pay him a little bit of special attention?

Will the child notice? A friend who worked with black children once told me that they often ask why white people stare at them. Is that me? Or is it those white people who stare in disgust? Is it my special attention that is making them feel uncomfortable? Am I making their race more obvious because I am nicer? Am I making their lives that much more difficult? I can't be the only one who feels this way, but am I one of the only ones who admits to it and thinks about it?

A couple of months ago, two maintenance men, one black and one white, were fixing our toilet. I was the only one home so I had to tell them what was wrong and see if they could fix it. When explaining what had been happening, I spoke to and looked at the black man. I made sure to be extra polite and smile. I wasn't rude to the white man, but I did not make a conscious effort to be especially polite. I didn't think about it at the time, but I believe I wanted to make sure the black man knew I respected him. I wanted to assure him I wasn't racist. If he noticed, I wonder if I made him uncomfortable. I wonder if he thought I was racist.

I'm not a racist in the sense of believing my superiority of others, but I am not colorblind as I thought I was. But I realize the naiveté of my earlier attitude that I do

not recognize color in a person. I am starting to realize how racial differences do make people different, even on the inside. Jara's hair culture demonstrates that despite our similarities and friendship; there are differences in our cultures and those differences are based on race.

> "In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way. And in order to treat some persons equally, we must treat them differently."

-Harry A. Blackmun,
Retired Justice United States Supreme Court,
Author of Roe v. Wade