



A VIEW FROM
THE IVORIES



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A View from the Ivories
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Foreword

My piano teacher was Louie Liebman. He was a tough, brilliant, and gifted pianist from Brooklyn, New York who happened to settle up the street from us, in a new subdivision called Sunny Ridge. I went to school with his son. I was fascinated with the keys as far back as the age of three. At eight, I discovered a box of jazz albums that my cousin had stowed in our attic when he left for college. At one of my sometimes-tortuous lessons with Louie, I mentioned listening to these albums and trying to “play what I heard.” Well, this got old Louie’s attention and our time together became two parts lessons and one part playing what I heard on those albums (which included Andre Previn, Oscar Peterson, and other talented artists). Louie also had a harpsicord that I also learned to play in the process. I loved the piano, and it became my gateway to the world.

When you are the middle child of seven siblings, getting recognition was a chore. My banging on the piano was a constant source of irritation, so I’ve been told. By twelve, I was playing in church and the pastor complained that my Sunday morning prelude sounded like a late night in a cocktail lounge. (So, I went down the street to play for the Pentecostals. They were more appreciative). My professional career really began at Christmas and at the age of twelve. I played a big theater organ in J.C. Penney’s on King Street in Alexandria, Virginia, outside of Washington, DC. Embarrassingly, it was placed on the store balcony in the middle of the ladies’ lingerie section where it so happened that many of the young girls from my junior high school showed up to buy their first training bras.

High school was a whirlwind of music competitions and traveling with a trio that included my brother George and (the all too gorgeous) Bobbie Gardner, both with stunning voices. We were the squeaky-clean kids from church who sang Christian music and show tunes for the ladies’ clubs, youth rallies, and churches up and down the east coast. From there, I toured in a group around the world for a year when I was eighteen

and I eventually landed back in Virginia where my brother had formed a group called The Fellowship.

The next 13 years with The Fellowship included a five-year Christian rock show with Pat Robertson's CBN Network, 10 USO Tours, Las Vegas, corporate industrial shows, and more miles than I can remember. It was in tour bus that I got my master's degree in Music Composition and Theory. During the road years, the other part of my brain wrote arrangements for groups that performed at Disney, Busch Gardens, and for a ton of corporate shows.

Life took a huge turn when I left the road, my marriage, and the safety of the bus. Totally broke, with a large (for that time) payment on my new grand piano, I discovered who I was. My piano technique soared, and I found my voice that didn't need a band or backup singers. I also found love again in a way that completed me. What I didn't count on was my view of people and the world. From the piano bench, I became a student of life and life came to me.

When someone asks me, what kind of life I've led...I answer, charmed, blessed, amazing. There aren't enough words or time to describe it all. Sure, I've had depression, crisis, chaos, death, divorce, and way too many drinks. But you know, life and divine providence has given me a ringside seat and Forrest Gump moments to some of the most breathtaking experiences and utterly fascinating people on earth. On more than one occasion, friends, colleagues, and mere strangers have said "you should write a book." I know, it's a little trite. This small tome is no great work of art. It's just a simple celebration of some of the most interesting and compelling moments of my journey. There are some very intriguing people who inhabit these pages. This collection of stories includes entertainers, politicians, religious figures, family, and just plain folk with whom I have come in contact and shared moments. There are also just a few who I consider my heroes. I am a pianist, and this is just my "view from the ivories." Enjoy!

MUSIC

Ben

Radio City is the most famous song and dance venue in the world. One of the production companies that I wrote music for was Ray Bloch Productions. One of their clients, The Equitable Insurance Company, had bought the hall out for five days. The star lineup was of course, the Rockettes, Ben Vereen, and a group (all one hundred of them) called Up with People. I was lucky enough to be commissioned to write the show beating out the Radio City conductor, Elman Anderson, and a very talented (should have gotten the show) young composer with a cocaine problem.

Ray Bloch was an old 40s and 50s entertainment purveyor with a gambling problem. At a very uncertain and broke point in his career, he sold the company to his accountant, Franklyn Dickson Sr. Franklyn dropped dead on a gig in Florida and his son, Frank Dickson Jr., assumed the throne. They had booked our group, The Fellowship many times, and we had done a number of industrial shows for them. It was one of the biggest breaks I ever got. It also helped me stretch my writing chops to a whole new level.

The Equitable's ad agency premiered a new jingle just prior to the show and I was summoned to New York for the rollout. It was to be included into the show. We went to the New York Hilton for its press release to four hundred reporters at lunchtime. When no one claps...you know it's bad. Well, a talented group of musicians performed this new work of art. It had all the right touchy-feely buttons that warm insurance jingles should have, but not quite enough. When they finished performing the jingle--nothing. Even I got a knot in my stomach. That prompted the producers to have me write the jingle "Count on the Equitable" into a finale (that I would also write) which was called, "Live the Good Life" (better title, don't you think).

Mother Nature showed up right on time with a good case of the flu for me. I was sitting up in bed scoring the entire show and about to finish it, but I needed someone to copy the orchestral and vocal parts. The musical director I hired to replace me in The

Fellowship, Larry Day, was still living in DC, as the group had not yet relocated to Nashville. Never would I have finished without his keen help.

So, into the studio we went... to lay down the tracks for the entire show. The Radio City orchestra actually played along with my scores produced in the studio. Apparently, they did this with a lot of shows on an old, outdated four-track tape playback deck. When I left the road, the running joke was that my brother George took all the Christians to Nashville and David kept all the heathens in DC. That was partly true... we needed a big vocal sound for *Up with People* to sing along with. There were six of my best heathens-- my brother George, Dove Award gospel soloist Sue Dodge, and two members of the group Gladd (that I had put together when I was still with Old Towne, our production company). The vocals were amazing and to this day, I consider it the best vocal session I ever conducted.

The day I showed up at Radio City with my scores and soundtracks, I was nervous and am sure had that "deer in the headlight" look. Elman Anderson, the Radio City Conductor, was a complete gentleman and recognized a newbie when he saw one. He treated my work as if it were the premier of a Beethoven Symphony. He and his wife and my parents became great friends at the wrap luncheon. Who knew? Thanks Elman!

Radio City is famous for its elevator stages whose technology was later used on aircraft carriers in WWII. It is a cavernous place with great acoustics. I asked one of the crew for a good Radio City story and he did not disappoint me.

They had the circus there some years back and one of the elephants died on the lower level and not near one of the elevated stages. How did they get it out...with chainsaws (really)! I also asked the Rockettes on which show did they have the most fun? Hands down, they all answered *Liberace!* This is also where this not so clever southerner learned, you don't ever refer to any female performer as "girl."

Rehearsals included a choreographer and the Rockettes and lasted for two days. On the third day they sent me downstairs to work with Ben Vereen. As I took the elevator down, I was looking forward to meeting the man who played Chicken George in *Roots* and played countless parts on Broadway that included *Wicked*, *Fosse*, *I'm Not Rappaport*, *Hair*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Pippin*, *Grind*, *Jelly's Last Jam*, and *A Christmas Carol*. It turns out his musical director (who showed up later) and I took piano class together at the Philadelphia School of the Arts. However, today he was not in a good mood and was obviously not prepared. I went to his dressing room and asked, "How are doing with the music?" He was wearing a bright red satin prizefighter robe. What I realized immediately was that he could not read music. I sat down at the rehearsal piano in his dressing room and plunked the parts out church-style, which he understood, and for which I was thanked. However, from the smell of alcohol and the sniffles, I sensed we had other issues.

Rehearsals at Radio City are big very expensive propositions. There are fifty plus musicians in the orchestra, forty Rockettes, seventy-nine on the crew, one hundred cast members of *Up with People*, and Ben Vereen. It was time to run the finale when up comes a flustered production assistant announcing that "Ben Vereen has left the hall." I thought Ellie Lessin, the Ray Bloch account rep, was going to pass out. Apparently Ben was tired of waiting and was agitated from whatever else he was doing. Even when he showed back up for the show the next day, he was supposed to be in a tuxedo. Ben showed in a straw hat, red jacket, khaki trousers, and tennis shoes.

My good friend George Gracey was the Senior Producer for this show and the one who brought me on board. We had done many shows together. He had worked with Mike Nichols on Broadway and was the road manager for the infamous *Tracadeo Ballet*. He was the personification of a trooper. Calming stepping into the mayhem on stage he said, "We are going to be just fine" (and pointed to me). David King sang the scratch tracks for Ben and write all the music... he can do the finale." And so, I did...take a big breath, Dave.

The house and stage faded to black, and the orchestra began the introduction, playing notes that I had written. Out of the wings through the dark, I stepped into a single spotlight and began to sing, "Live the Good Life." It was a surreal amazing experience as the music, my own scores, wrapped around me and I had the entire stage to myself with the orchestra lit in silhouette.

This was one of my epic-sized finales. When my solo finished, Up with People streamed on the stage, twenty at a time. As the arrangement shifted into the commercial (that got no applause at the Hilton), the orchestra shifted gears, changed keys, and then the Rockettes entered. When they kick, I've got to tell you, it makes a lot of noise. I did not get the full force of the moment until one of the Rockettes yelled at me and said, "Move into the line honey!"

The finale crescendo was as big as I've ever heard (standing in the middle helps). I moved out of the dance line downstage with Up with People and the Rockettes surrounding me singing in full force, "*Count on the Equitable, we'll help your dreams come true!*"

One of the greatest moments of my life was not what just happened, but rather this... Radio City Music Hall was entirely empty. There were two people sitting all alone, down front, in the darkness of the second row watching the rehearsal. Those two people were my mother and father. A rare moment for anyone--it was one of the greatest gifts I ever gave them. Mom and Dad, I love and miss you both every day. Thank you for giving me wings!



Ben