
THE BIRTH OF A SONG

How "A Night Walk in Manhattan" Happened

By Tony Tedeschi

Having written several hundred articles for newspapers, magazines, broadcast and electronic media, plus a dozen books — including two novels — I have become almost instinctual about needing to tell the story. A sense of plot, character development, even some sort of climactic point or denouement invests almost everything I create, even songs. The flip side of this process is, almost inadvertently, seeing stories everywhere. In terms of non-fiction, it becomes a matter of following the facts and trying to ascertain where they knit together. In terms of fiction, be it prose, poetry or lyrics, it becomes a matter of manufacturing the story, often from minimal input.

So there I sit, of a summer evening, in an alfresco restaurant, on the northern edge of Times Square, waiting for a dinner companion, watching the world go by and doing what I always do when I have time like that in my own space: writing in a journal. It's that time of early evening when people are heading places, captured by their determination to get wherever it is they are going: to commuter lines, their own dinner dates, after-work cocktail hours and, in some cases, adrift in an unspecific agenda.

They look as if they are not supposed to be together, but nonetheless very much belong to each other. A couple counting on the anonymity of Manhattan swallowing them into its multitudes.

I am simply logging this dynamic. I am taken by people sharing drinks and conversation beneath the blinds of darkening windows in cocktail lounges and bistros: a mélange of what is clearly that need for one-upmanship at the core of conversations during this hour in New York City. Egos are definitely in play — laurels for conquerors at the end of a good day, vulnerability for those for whom New York has exacted its fee that day.

Along the side street that Ts into the corner where I sit, a figure emerges from a rowhouse, walks a few paces, stops under a street lamp and lights a cigarette. For some reason, he looks to me a bit dangerous, maybe for no other reason than that my nascent story needs some element of tension. However, the plotline really is born when I see a couple stroll by, hand-in-hand, seemingly a postcard to innocence. However, for me, there is something about them that appears out of the ordinary, not your typically mundane boy-girl, hand-in-hand stroll. They look as if they are not supposed to be together, but nonetheless very much belong to each other. A couple counting on the anonymity of Manhattan swallowing them into its multitudes.

Clearly, all of the above is mostly figments of my imagination. While I'd bet a portion of it is anchored in observation powers I've developed over decades as a journalist, it is nonetheless images forming in my head, merely extrapolated from what I am seeing. My imagination peters into the real world when my dinner companion arrives. I put away my notes. When I feel very strongly that I am onto something creative, that something insists upon being addressed. Those notes kept insisting I work with them. I had the elements of something. It became my challenge to work them into the coherence of a story. It was the couple who intrigued me mostly, even though they

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Next Workshop

December 6

The next songwriting workshop is at 7:30 p.m.

Jan. 3 at Five Towns College in Dix Hills.

Happy Holidays!

The ISS wishes you and your loved ones a joyous season and wonderful new year.

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THE BIRTH OF A SONG

Writer's Choice

by Pedro Pereira

Last month's Writer's Choice was no contest: **Walter Sargent** ran away with the title. He got so many votes I stopped counting after a while. Two other songs got a vote apiece.

Walter's "You're Beautiful When You Smile" is a peppy number with a killer chorus

Winner: Walter Sargent

that he said he wrote with commerciality in mind. Walter said he spent some time listening to what's on the radio these days to get some tips.

Now the ISS membership has been known to be a, shall we say, eclectic-minded bunch when it comes to picking Writer's Choice. A show tune could win one month and a country ditty the next. But this time, it seems just about everyone was attuned to what is commercial.

As a bonus, not only does Walter's tune have commercial appeal, but it also is catchy and smart. And that's a lot more than most of us have grown to expect from music intended for the masses.

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had simply strolled by where I was sitting. While I toyed with the other images I'd scribbled down that night, the story I kept seeing in my mind involved some sort of travel through this environment. The couple would be the journeyers. They were the tour guides for my ode to night settling onto Manhattan. However, the why and wherefore of their existence was mine. I was creating their history. In effect, their personalities were what I saw them to be. Their journey became mine. I assumed the role of the male protagonist. The story within the song worked for me only if it were first person present tense. Since I'd created the man's history, he became me. I had my plotline. The song that evolved from the story follows:

Me, I'm drawn into the city,/primped, perfumed and smartly dressed/Yeah, I know it's a world bereft of pity/this gilded temple to our excess./But anticipation is its fare/that beckoning call to what might happen there,/behind those chic bistros' darkened blinds,/abstracted colors outside the lines.

A shadow floats from a dim-lit doorway/The glow of a cigarette trails in his wake. /The wretched refuse of another poor day/about to trade his reality for another fake. /He pauses near this place I wait for you/checks me out with a sideways glance/then moves along and fades from my view/granting I live another day by happenstance.

Oh, the kiss that bonded me to you/introduced this scent of danger to what we do.

On a night walk in Manhattan/like a pair of cotton-pawed cats/You by my side, we pitter-patter on/There's faux light streaming from the cracks/as we slide into shadows we've made our own/the two of us hiding from our more commonplace homes/loosed from the boxes of our ticky-tacky world/swimming against the current and the swirl.

Adrift in these canyons hewn from stone/It's only you that I embrace. /The need to feel this world with you alone/in the seductive isolation of this place/with all the glaring lights and blaring traffic/playing their counterpoint to our song/drowning out all the buzz and all the static/of two righteous lives that were all wrong.

Now this universe that's closing in around us/scripts the new plot we've become/with all these new scenes here now to confound us/ while stripping away all our defenses one by one. /So, tell me, lady, do you love me?/Can we live here on the run/with our histories hanging up there hovering/above this new page we've just begun?/With no backward glances for anyone?

Oh, the kiss that bonded me to you/introduced this scent of danger to what we do.

On a night walk in Manhattan /like a pair of cotton-pawed cats. /You at my side, we pitter-patter on. /There's faux light streaming from the cracks/as we slide into shadows we've made our own/the two of us hiding from our more commonplace homes/loosed from the boxes of our ticky-tacky world/swimming against the current and the swirl. /Me, me with you, girl/swimming against the riptide of the world. /Me, me with you girl/swimming against all the riptides of their world.

What is particularly gratifying about this series of non-events on a warm evening in Manhattan developing into a song is that it reversed the process by which I usually develop a song. Generally, for me a song begins as a series of chords that somehow dictates a melody, then the music drives the lyrics. It took a substantial amount of editing even to get my journal notes down to the lyrics of the seven-plus minutes the song now runs, but they became wrapped in music that I feel works with the mood I wanted to create.

It's a lot to ask of an audience to follow along through the lyrics of a long song. When I do play this out, I only do so when I feel I have the attention of the audience and that they may be ready to follow a nuanced story. It's great fun when the story becomes theirs and they relate that back to you. "Spooky," one listener said. "Really?" I replied. She nodded. Sometimes they see it the way I did; sometimes they don't. Irony. The characters I created become the characters they recreate. What the hell, that may be the germ of yet another tale to tell.

 University Cafe

DECIDING WHAT TO PLAY

By Pedro Pereira

After **Sonny Speed** scheduled me for one of the slots at SUNY–Stony Brook’s University Cafe monthly gig, I had to make the big decision: what songs to play.

I have reached the point at which I have many more songs to perform than I can fit into a half–hour set. This is a blessing because I can vary my sets, and since I mostly play three– or four–number open mic sets, I don’t have to repeat songs often. It also means I can shelve a song for a while when I get bored of it. But it’s also a curse because I don’t spend as much time perfecting each tune as I should.

When I was confronted with the decision of what to play at my University Cafe set last month, I reviewed what I had been performing most recently and took a look at which songs I had shelved for a while. I wanted to strike a balance. I wanted to play tunes that have matured and I am comfortable with, but I also wanted to play some of the numbers that are a little more challenging but easy to screw up.

I ran through the set several times in the two weeks leading up to the performance to make sure it flowed well.

Among the latter are my mid–tempo ditties “I Need a Hand” and “Everything.” Both are thoroughly enjoyable when everything falls into place, but if something goes wrong, it can be very distracting. I really wanted to play those two, so I resolved to practice them as much as possible. I started to play them out every chance I got and I practiced them at home as well. “Hand” is a great set starter because it has a lot of energy, but I thought maybe I should do it later after getting comfortable.

A friend who served as a test audience for my set, however, insisted that I start with “Hand” because he thought it would set the pace nicely for an energetic performance. In the end, I took his advice, and I’m glad I did.

After opening with “Hand,” I needed something comfortable, a song I wouldn’t have to think about while playing it. The choice was obvious: “Raining,” a number I wrote almost three years ago and that I never tire of playing. It’s one of two or three tunes that I have gotten requests for. After the intensity of “Raining,” I thought something a little breezier would work well, so I went with “Everything,” a tune that ISS member and newsletter contributor **Tony Tedeschi** helped me write.

In planning the set, I remembered Sonny’s advice about how to sequence a CD with ebbs and flows. I figured the advice was applicable to a live set as well. So I took the two most intense numbers and played them up front, then eased off with “Everything” and followed that with a finger–picking ballad, “Nobody,” which has a nice melody. I picked up the pace slightly with “New Hampshire,” which starts out easy and builds from there, and I ended the set with a faster number, “Last Man on the Planet,” one of my favorite songs to play.

Had time permitted, I would have played another mid–tempo number, “Never Let You Down,” before “Last Man,” but I had to drop it.

This was the first time I played a longer set in which I stuck with the setlist. I ran through the set several times in the two weeks leading up to the performance to make sure it flowed well. Even so, I was open to any on–stage changes that I might judge necessary as a result of the crowd’s reaction. I hesitated to play “Nobody” in a noisy bar, but ultimately I decided to keep it and I don’t think the set suffered for it.

Sometimes on–the–spot set changes are inevitable. I had prepared a seven–song set

Who Played What

Here’s the list of songwriters and songs from last month’s ISS workshop:

Walter Sargent
“You’re Beautiful When You Smile”
Sonny Meadows
“We Are the Baby Boomers”
Conrad W. Tyras
“I Can’t Forget You”
Guy Pezzullo
“Misson”
Bob Campbell
“Lady in the Harbor”
Jim Caputo
“Show me a Path”
Frank Gambino
“From Bobby Socks to Stockings”
Tim Huss
“Weep”
Lois Morton
“The Red, White and Blues”
Estelle Henrich
“Petty Crime and Punishment”
Amy Golden Uleis
“Writing on the Wall”
Pedro Pereira
“The Metaphor”



What's Doin'

ISS members are always out and about. Check your local listings for appearances live, on the radio or even on TV. Go to www.islandsongwriters.org for gigs and links to member sites with information about CD releases, shows and MP3s. Here's what's happening in the coming weeks. (*Check with the venue first because dates and times may change.*)

ISS Workshop

Test out your songs in front of fellow musicians, who provide constructive feedback. The workshop is on the first day of each month at **Five Towns College, Burrs Lane**, Dix Hills. Run by ISS Director **Sonny Speed**, It starts at 7:30 p.m. Bring a guitar to perform your song live, or you may choose to play a CD or tape. A piano is available for keyboardists. Be sure to bring 25 copies of your lyrics so other workshops attendees can follow along and provide feedback.

Next workshop: Jan. 3

University Cafe

Look who's playing next at Stony Brook:

Dec. 15: Jim Caputo, Stuart Markus.

Don't forget, an open mic follows the featured performers.

Promote Yourself on the ISS Web Site

The ISS is now offering songwriters *their own web pages* on the ISS web site. Whether you already have your own web site or not, a personal web page on the ISS site brings you closer to the traffic with a polished and professional look. If you don't already have a web site, it is an especially good deal. The fee is \$30 a year.

Plus, you are supporting ISS web site development. So if you like the way the web site is going, you can help *keep it going* by signing up. Please see the web site for details: <http://www.islandsongwriters.org>

Deciding What to Play

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for a performance last summer and when I got to the venue, I found that I would actually have to play two four-song sets. I then had to decide how to break up the planned set and which number I would add that I hadn't planned to play.

It worked out in the end, but not having to make such decisions at the University Cafe last month allowed me to just concentrate on delivering the songs to the best of my ability and enjoy the performance as much as I could. And as it turned out, planning the set was almost as much fun as delivering it.

Open Mics

Borders, Jericho Turnpike, Syosset, hosted by Bill Ryan or Vincent Crici, first Thursday of the month. Sign-up at 7:30 p.m. *Next gig: Jan. 6.*

Pisces Cafe, Railroad Ave, Babylon, 8 p.m. Wednesdays.

Sea Cliff Coffee Co., Sea Cliff, 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays.

University Cafe

Suny/Stony Brook, hosted by **Sonny Speed**, 8:30 p.m. third Thursday of the month. Featured performers followed by open mic. *Next gig: Dec. 15.*

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