

## **Memoir Writing, Spring 2016**

*The Session*, by Cynthia Mullis

It was the end of a late night that had crossed into the next square on the calendar several hours earlier. I had already worked most of the day at my music-publishing gig that my boss and I jokingly called “the sweatshop.” Then, as I often did, I stayed late and ate Chinese take-out in our two-person office, one of several small businesses in the twelfth floor office park. After hours it became a place where I could practice my saxophone without annoying the neighbors. When the last person left the floor late that evening, I got out my saxophone and began warming up on scales and patterns, reviewing melodies and getting steeled for the mission ahead. Just before midnight, I packed up my ax (“Come heavy or not at all” as Uncle Junior once told Tony in the Sopranos) and marched downstairs to hail a cab to a downtown West Village jazz club called Visiones.

Every Thursday night after the main show, Visiones hosted late-night jazz where the house band would play a short set, followed by an open jam session starting around 1:00 a.m. I entered the boxy street-level club, paid my \$5 cover charge, and with the included drink ticket, grabbed my usual gin martini to augment my courage. After adding my name to the list of musicians waiting their turn to sit in, I settled into a seemingly safe spot as the music began. I spotted a few friends but they avoided eye contact—nobody was interested in conversation with me. Camaraderie in the ranks of sax players was negated by the competition to survive.

At this session, I usually didn’t get to play a note until well after 2:00 a.m. and this night was no different. Finally my name was called and I quickly assembled my saxophone. Like cannon fodder charging over the edge of the trench, I climbed on stage along with a couple of other horn players who were white with fear and sweat. A semi-familiar jazz tune was counted off and the carnage commenced through a barrage of full-volume horn solos as the rhythm section pounded away behind us. As it became my turn to solo, the piano player, having endured enough trauma from an endless line of soloists, stood up, slammed the piano lid shut and went AWOL from the stage for the night. Whatever harmonic structure remained was obliterated and I was left to slug it out with the Cole Porter standard as it veered into Ornette-Coleman-style free jazz. My valiant attempt to navigate the musical chaos was terminated by the onslaught of a drum solo and a reprised melody that ended the song. I crawled off the stage feeling bruised and defeated, and returned my vintage saxophone (rumored to be made of from the brass of WW2 artillery shells) to

its case. I looked around the room, seeking even a sliver of empathy from my friends, but there was no hint of acknowledgement that we knew each other in the civilian world outside of Visiones.

The jam session ended shortly after that. Musicians nursed the last of their drinks and exchanged business cards and handshakes with their buddies. The *esprit de corps* eluded me as I slipped out the door unnoticed and alone. I waited on the corner of McDougal and West Third for a cab back to the East Village, adding up the money the night would cost in cab fare and expenses for the chance to blow a few notes in middle-of-the-night Gotham.

Arriving back at my place on Avenue A, I trudged past the mangled mailboxes and scuffed tile in the entryway of the pre-war building (and by pre-war, I mean pre-Civil War) and lugged my saxophone up the three flights to my floor. I entered the weary darkness of my tenement apartment and when I turned the on the light, I noticed water dripping onto the antique green linoleum of the small kitchen. A pipe had burst in the ceiling and all of the cups and bowls and dishes on the rickety shelves above the ancient sink were filled with rusty brown water. It was as if New York City and my old tenement apartment were conspiring to taunt me: *How badly do you want to play your saxophone? How much are you willing to endure to be a musician? Why are you doing this to yourself?*