

All I can think is; "This harmony sounds....impossible."

The tree frogs, I mean.

I test my pitch perception and conclude that it's a C# on top with a Bb on the bottom, but that would make sense.

This makes no sense.

The strange sounds arrive in about ten second intervals. Every single time. The same two tones. Like an idiot, I look up into the dark trees. All I see are the twisting of the maple and elm branches, the spiraling of blackened trunks and I wonder if the frogs are clinging to the ninety year old bark or if they have nests. Or if it's one group from across the boulevard calling to the others perched in similar trees on the other side. The high harmony starts first, then the lower tone joins in as the two notes swirl like strands of DNA while the volume swells. Then they stop. Then they repeat. It's spring, so I'm also thinking of mating season and that it's the sound of males calling out to the females or vice versa. Then, I think that maybe I'm hearing music that will never be duplicated by humans.

Untraceable.

Like I said, an idiot.

I stub my smoke out and before I go back inside from the wood deck I'm standing on, there's a scuffle of leaves from

underneath. Then, I hear the low boom of one more slow-rider as it rolls by the front of the house at five MPH. The scuffle of leaves? Cat? Maybe a skunk. The music from inside the slow-rider? Killa Freque. She's been hot all spring. It's that time of year.

I'm a struggling musician. I'm working on a musical in our basement. My wife, Carla, is asleep upstairs and it's getting pretty late. She doesn't know about the Amaretto and Black Tar Opium cocktail I've grown a taste for while working on this project. It's a lovely concoction that an old friend turned me onto back in school. I've been needing something as of late, so I thought I'd bring this particular remedy back for a hopefully, brief encore. The musical is very low budget. "*Laurie In Amber*" sprung from the mind of a friend who used to be a copywriter at Leo Burnett. He wanted to do a radical show based on the life of Laurie Dann. She was a young woman from back in the 1980's who shot and killed a boy and wounded five other children out in Winnetka before taking a family hostage, and then, finally killing herself.

He thought it would be revolutionary theater, something he felt was a lost form. I wavered at his assessment. During our initial meeting in Greektown over beers at a club, I finally rubbed my forehead and mentioned how I thought that "*Laurie In*

Amber" sounded like the scheme to make a play out of the toxic waste disaster at Love Canal; as Bill Murray and Dustin Hoffman wanted to do in the movie, *Tootsie*. He looked at me and smiled knowingly.

"Steve" I said, That was a joke. People laughed at it. You were supposed to laugh at it. It was pathetic, no offense. I just don't know what you're trying to do here."

Steve looked around. He gives a smile to the waitress who has brought him another beer. Then he turns his head to me and says,

"I know. But there's something about the crime that got under my skin as a writer. It got into my head and set the wheels turning. It's really Greek in so many ways. Hell, John Wayne Gacy is theater now. There's a movie about him playing at Sundance. Look....murder on stage is nothing new. Do I have to even say this?"

"No, no. Of course not. But.." And then, I look at him for a few seconds. "What's the whole "amber" thing anyway? I don't get it." He leaned forward on his elbows.

"She's preserved in memory like a scorpion; like something dangerous that's acceptable to look at in this safe state. Theater is the amber. Or maybe in an amulet. A symbol. I even thought maybe she'd be wearing a necklace on stage with a black

widow or something in amber around her neck."

I stared.

I don't have a lot of time anymore for nonsense in my life. I mean, wasting your days with pie-in-the-sky projects ended for me a few years ago. I really wanted to get up and leave at this point. Then Steve looked up and said,

"Stay with me on this. Please? I've just been fired damn it. I... I.... I know it'll work. It's going to be here in Chicago. I've got backing from the theater. I mean, up to a point. They've seen my last draft, the one you have. They're giving me the go ahead. You'll get a small payment up front, like we talked about. And then, you know, part of the gate when it happens. It'll be right there in the contract."

I've got nothing else going on. We're both in the same boat. And Steve's always been sort of a lovable asshole. So, I sigh and half-heartedly say, "Yeah, alright." Steve's eyes light right up. I then watch as he lights another cigarette and I nod toward him. "So, who's gonna sing the murderer's parts?"

"For you? I'll get Riahna!"

I put on the headphones and take a deep breath as I replay a rough melody to be sung by the murderer and the hostage family, Aria style. It takes place in the second act. In the lyrics or

libretto, I guess, Laurie is passively "singing in a mono-tone" as Steve instructed. Stuff about how she has to commit this crime while the family is answering her admonitions in a Greek Chorus sort of call and response. "*Jesus, this is lame.*" I say out loud.

Then, I think only of the music.

I take another slug of icy Amaretto and finger my way through the synthesizer. My mind is wandering from *Laurie In Amber* back to the tree frogs. So I, once again try to find the elusive pair of tones I'd heard earlier.

The frogs.

I can't even get close to it. *Maybe there's a third tone in there*, I think.

I hit the half smoked blunt with the gummy ball of opium squeezed into the tip and I go back outside.

The little reptiles are still at it. It's the first thing I hear as I lean on the deck rails. This time though, the two tones are clearly down the scale a bit. I was wrong about there being a third, which makes it more of a mystery. And the harmony seems to have changed; gotten closer together to where it's nearly becoming one.

They're not calling to each other now. They're just singing.
"*That's it!*" I think.

I carefully walk back downstairs and grab my pocket sized,

multi-track field recorder. As I'm making my way down there, I'm thinking;

"Screw Steve and this stupid play. I'm calling him tomorrow and bailing out." I then walk up the carpeted stairs and return to the deck.

I'm determined to capture this strange harmony. So, I set the input levels and then carefully place the unit on the rail and hit the tiny red record button.

After about twenty seconds, I see a long shadow that slowly begins to shrink as it makes a path up the driveway to my left. My time perception is screwed up. I don't know how long that shadow has been in view. Before I can bolt inside, there's someone standing right there as the porch light creates a longer, more angled shadow; like in a Hopper painting. Actually, it's more like Batman. The left side of his already dark face is disappearing into even deeper darkness. He stands there, three wooden steps and twenty feet away, in full ghetto effect; head rag, long SouthPole tee and shiny Adidas shorts. He's all alone. I keep a few baseball bats inside and then there's the long kitchen knives.

But here, I've got nothing.

To make things worse, I'm probably a little too high.

He's got to be around twenty, I'm thinking. This gives me a

little relief. Anymore, it's the thirteen year olds that are scary. Raging hormones and guns are a bad mix. I'm hoping that this guy doesn't have a weapon. Finally I plant my feet and say, "What're you doing in my driveway?" He just shuffles in place before reaching down toward his crotch. I heard that the hood rats walk like that to either keep their gun from falling out of loose shorts, or to make you think they have one. I'm only three steps from the door. I explode from my sticky inertia, throw caution to the wind and break for it. When I finally realize that I'm on the other side, and that I have the door slammed and locked, I'm on my knees, splayed on the floor like an NHL goaltender.

Carla's far enough toward the front of the house, that I'm hoping she sleeps as soundly as she usually does. She doesn't need to know about this. I suddenly have enough problems right now. Leaning against the wall near the door, I'm more alert than I was a while ago. So I get up and slowly go to the window. As I look out with one eye, I can see him from behind, sitting with his legs dangling over the deck, staring out in the same direction I was earlier. I sit back down and think about what to do next. I stay still for a few minutes, then, I look again. He's still there, still looking. Why haven't I called 911? I crawl to the phone. Then, I put it back. This is Chicago. They'll just

take him in, process him, and let him right back out, probably within an hour. Then, maybe he gets pissed about it and wants me to pay somehow. It happens. We're city dwellers. Try not to be a punk. This shit happens. Plus, believe it or not, I'm thinking; "*He hasn't done anything.*" I light a cigarette, figuring that if he's not gone when I put it out, I'm going to make a move. A few minutes later, he's still there. I open the door and peek out. He turns around.

He holds his hands up in a surrender type of gesture. "I promise you bro', I'm clean."

"Dude," I say, "You've got to get out of here."

"You call 911?"

"No."

"I'm just listening," he then says with a smile.

I walk slowly, skirting the area he's sitting in.

"To the frogs?" I ask.

I walk closer. Then, I watch him as he looks out across the backyard. He turns toward me, still smiling. His eyes are now glimmering as he just gazes up into the tress. Then, the kid moves over a few inches, as if to make room for me. I stay standing, about eight feet away.

"That's modal, right there" he says as he's listening to the frogs. "Like Coltrane. During his Godly period."

"I think I hear three tones" I finally relax a bit as I respond to his evaluation of the still elusive harmony. "I tried to find it on my keyboard, it's impossible; it's nature."

"It's nature and more. It's magic." he replied. "You play?"

"Yeah."

"So do I."

I smile.

"Are you high?" he then asks.

"Whattaya mean?"

"You partyin' or something?"

"Where are you from?" I ask. "You from around this area?"

"Yeah, I stay three streets over. Starr."

"Starr?"

He smiles. "Yeah. Starr. 150. He pulls out his wallet as I cringe. It happened so fast. Too fast. I stand up even straighter.

"150 Starr. Right over there cuzz."

He's pointing, but the porch light is low watt so I just pretend to see it. "Oh yeah. Hey, can't you hear 'em over there?" I ask in regard to the frogs. I then decide to let it go. As I said, I'm buzzed. And for better or worse, I'm feeling a bit more brave. He reaches again into his shorts and pulls out a five. Then he waves it in front of my eyes.

"This five says I can show you what them frog's are singin'. I heard you playin' a keyboard down there" he says as he motions to the basement.

Carla's inside. Hopefully, sleeping. Deeply. Hopefully.

I'm loaded, and he now seems younger than he did earlier. But in no way am I that stupid. Let him in the house? No way.

"Well, I say you can't. But there's a cheap Casio down there that runs on batteries. I'll bring it out and maybe we'll see." A smile crawls across his face. "Cool" he says.

"And you better bring a five with it."

Artists for centuries have chased sights and sounds. It's what they do. Because if you wait for them to come to you, you may be waiting a long time. So they sleep with a guitar by the bed, or under their pianos, sketchbooks and pads and pencils on the nightstands, post-it notes stuck to everything, chewed fingernails and countless stubbed out cigarette butts along with the vapors and tar of a million binges. I have to know what the tree frogs are doing. I have to know if everything can be scientifically and efficiently figured out by the plodding drudgery of humans, or if, as I'm hoping here, magic really does exist. So I smile back at my visitor and head for the basement. "Wait right here" I say.

"I ain't goin' nowhere brutha'"

I walk inside and snap the lock as I then head downstairs. I look at the sheet music that has fallen to the floor. The cat probably knocked it down. For some reason, I think of Mozart. Then, I laugh to myself in embarrassment at the thoughts of Mozart and *Laurie In Amber* at the same time. So I grab the small keyboard that's leaning against the wall and head upstairs. I then lock the door and walk quietly back onto the porch.

"They went and changed up that song" he says of the frogs that have taken their harmony back up a pitch and spaced it out a bit.

"That makes it what, three sets of harmony? I've got the other two on my recorder." I say thickly. So I cue them up and play them both as I pause the recorder and listen to the harmony they are now making. Then, I repeat it. Over and over. After this, I record the current harmony and play it with the previous two and then the live version. Then I record it again. I paste the recorded versions to different locations. Then, I change the pitch. And so on. By the time the frogs have stopped, (for good, maybe? It is getting late), I have a loop that is an ambient delight; an opium junkie's dream. I'm now sitting next to this kid and he's just staring into the sky. I'm grinning like a monkey. "

"When I get back inside, this is going to be my next

project. Fuck "Laurie In Amber."

I can't wait. I look over again at the kid, now giving him a brotherly nudge in the shoulder and say, "Is this cool, or what?" But he's simply in a trance. Then, his brow furrows and he starts to mutter something that I can't quite make out. "Hey" I say, still sitting. I am now closer to him than I've been all night. His lips are chapped and even in the dark, they are sort of whitened as more and more, he appears to be gone. "*Shit, he's a fuckin' crackhead*" I'm thinking. I still can't understand his muttering as I now push myself further from him. Then, I slowly rise to my feet.

He's still looking up into the trees. The frogs have ceased their vocalizing for awhile now. His eyelids have grown heavy as I'm now starting to worry about this guy. Soon, I hear soft steps to my left. I turn my head around as another long shadow is moving up the driveway. Then, two more. I make a break to the door. I've got to call 911 now. I don't care how many class-1 narcotics are in that basement. But I don't have my key. I must have set it down in the basement when I was grabbing the keyboard. The shadows shrink as the three of them are about to appear. When they do, I see it's a thin black woman and two boys. The boys are around grade school age. Suddenly, I'm more concerned than scared. Regardless of where you live, the sight of

a woman with children in tow can't be anything but an affirmative sign, I figure. She looks up at me, then motions with her head to my guest.

"I heard your voices down the street. I figured it was Roderick. And what you been doin' with my boy son? You gettin' him high?"

"No. No."

"Well then, lookit' im. How'd he git that way? Hm? You givin' him shit?"

I then explained how he had just showed up; that I'd been trying to find a way to get rid him, and that I'd locked myself out of the house and...

She's leaning over her son as she turns his seemingly catatonic head around. She now has his chin between her thumb and fingers. "Um-hmm" she says, shaking her head.

"He's got to have his insulin now. Every time those tree frogs start singin', off he goes. Then, I don't know where he is, so I got to go find him. I got no car. Heh." Her mood is a bit lighter now. If she was trying to rattle me with the drug accusations, it worked. My knees were beginning to weave a bit.

"And sure enough I'll find him. Thankfully, he's usually not far. But it never fails. When I do find him, he's near insulin shock. So....." she says as she takes the insulin kit out of her

bag right there on the deck and administers it to her son. His head has fallen onto her shoulder as she rubs it. "Gonna be fiiiine" she tells him. "He should know better to take care a' himself by this time."

"Nevah undastood what he sees in them frogs. It's like magic, or that man with the flute or somethin'. Kids folla him around all the time?"

"The Pied Piper."

"YEAH, that's it. The Pied Piper. That's what them frogs are to him. An' I tell 'im; Roderick, I don't know what gets you all up about them frogs. They waay too tiny to eat. Heh, heh." She then takes a chain that's around his neck.

"Lookit this" she says. "He had this done somewhere. I have no idea. Lookit it" she says as she thrusts an oval resin amulet toward me.

"It's one o'them frogs. This time a' year, late at night, I find 'em right inside the doorway. Thought this one was a big June bug, so I stepped on it. Roderick freaked right out; thought I killed 'im on purpose. He didn't know. So he took it and put it in a jar. Next thing I know, there it is around his neck.'

Suddenly, I'm firmly on the ground.

"Well ma'am, makes you feel any better, I think they're kind of magic too. You're son here has a great feel for nature's

beauty."

"Roderick says it's the sound of the Father and the Son. An' that one day, he'll hear the Holy Ghost in there too. He says so far, he just hears the first two. Heh, heh."

Roderick is now holding his mother around the shoulder as he looks at her and smiles. "You done cattin' around the neighborhood this time?" she says with authority. "Well then....let's go. Sorry he mighta scared you."

"Not a problem." I say. "Hey Roderick. Take care of yourself."

They all get up to go.

"You'll never find it you know. The frogs. That harmony." Roderick says from the driveway.

"Why'd you say that?"

"Because I got it. Right up in here" he says, pointing to his temple. "An' I ain't givin' it away." Then he gives me a wide grin.

"That's OK Roderick" I smile. "It belongs to you anyway."

IN AMBER

Mickey Vidakovich