



Take it Away, Dave!

You know, we now have so many stories in this collection that I'm starting to have trouble remembering what episodes I've told you about! But luckily, I can use my computer to quickly search through them all, and checking now, I see that the word 'duck' doesn't appear. That must mean that I have never told you about my first day in the hotel!

The hotel job I mentioned in last week's story was a very lucky break for me. Most young musicians were happy to get one or two nights work every week - to have *six* nights guaranteed was a fabulous opportunity. But when I was first offered the job, there was a huge problem for me; they wanted a sax/flute player, but I had never played saxophone, and didn't even own one.

When the man who was doing the hiring first spoke to me about the job, he asked me to come over to his house with my instruments and play for him as a tryout. I started to mention the saxophone, or my lack of one, but he cut me off, "Bring that with you too, and let's play some tunes together!" We set a time for the next day.

At that point of course, I certainly started to regret all those years of living in the same house as a professional saxophone player and never showing any interest. But it didn't bother me too much; in my mind I was absolutely convinced of the superiority of classical musicians. I bought a saxophone from the music shop (I was still working there during the days), took it home and tried to figure out how to make it work.

When I went into the audition the next day the guy - an accordion player - said right away, "OK, let's start with the flute!" He was so used to hearing pop saxophone players, most of whom played flute as a 'second instrument' very badly, that he was trying to trip me up right at the beginning. But when I started to play my flute for him his eyes lit up; I was good! We played a few tunes together and he then said, "This is great! You've got the job!" And he named a starting day a couple of days away. When I started to ask about the saxophone, he waved me off, "No problem ..." He was obviously assuming that anybody who could play their 'second instrument' that well wouldn't have any trouble with the sax.

So there I was a few days later, in the musicians' room of the hotel in a brand new black suit, getting introduced to the other players. Three of us - flute, accordion, and double bass - then went out to start the first set, and my 'professional' career began in earnest. I certainly didn't know all the songs we had to play, but as I mentioned last week, the leader of the trio started each one, and I then picked it up as we went along. It was great fun, but about an hour or so later I saw the other musicians coming out onto the bandstand and knew that the next part wasn't going to be quite so easy.

We all took our places and I picked up the saxophone and put the strap over my neck - it was so heavy compared to the flute! The leader called out the first tune and we opened our folios to the music. It was a big pop hit, and as we started I noticed half-way down the page a big empty section where nothing was written but a string of chord symbols - a long improvised solo for the tenor sax! As we approached the solo section the leader waved with his arm for me to stand up, and I launched into my first ever ad lib solo, on an instrument I had been learning for a few hours.

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Even now when I think about this I want to squeeze my eyes shut in fear, but I guess I must have kept them open. I know so because I will never ... never ... forget the look on the orchestra leader's face when my incredible noise blurted out through the microphone over the whole room. It must have sounded like a duck being tortured! But it was actually mercifully quick - he made a frantic slashing motion to cut me off, and pointed to the guitar player, who quickly jumped up and poured out a great solo to fill the empty space.

Once we were all off the stand at the end of the evening, I was expecting to be thrown out of the job instantly, but I was surprised to find that I was kept on. They were pleased with the flute playing part of the program, and simply re-arranged the dance section to feature the other members of the orchestra, who were of course glad of the chance to play more. I continued to play the sax each evening, but only in the main part of each song ... no more 'solos' ...

After all, the customers were there to eat duck, not listen to one dying!

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